







## **WOMEN CALLED WILD**



*By the same Author*

**TRAVEL :**

UNCONDUCTED WANDERERS  
THE SECRET OF THE SAHARA, KUFARA  
FROM RED SEA TO BLUE NILE (ABYSSINIA)  
ADVENTURE (ARABIA)  
CONFLICT: FROM ANGORA TO AFGHANISTAN  
EIGHT REPUBLICS IN SEARCH OF A FUTURE  
(SOUTH AMERICA)

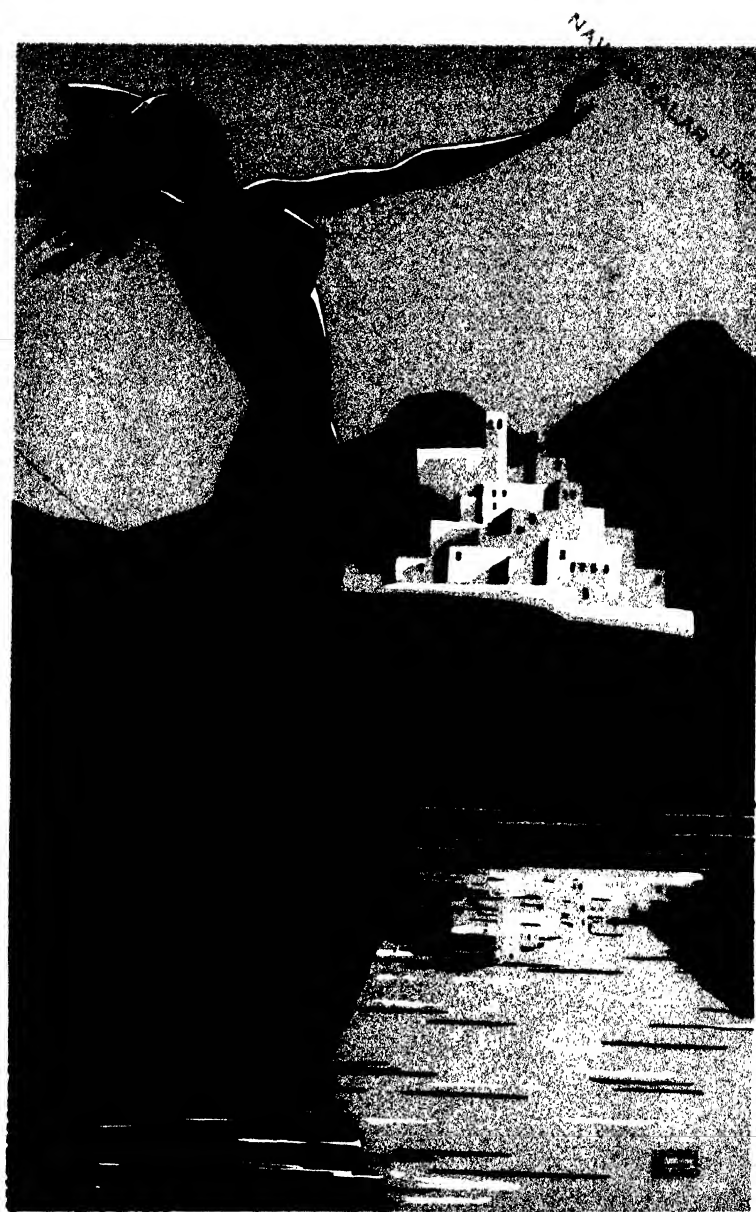
**BIOGRAPHY :**

EL RAISULI—SULTAN OF THE MOUNTAINS

**FICTION :**

IF THE GODS LAUGH  
SIROCCO  
QUEST  
ONE FLESH  
ORDINARY PEOPLE  
THE EXTRAORDINARY HOUSE





THE SLAVE TRADE

# WOMEN CALLED WILD

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## THE SLAVE TRADE

### *Abyssinia*

"I CAN show you other merchandise," said the Arab. We were in the suq<sup>1</sup> at Harar. Above our heads, strips of linen and torn matting dimmed the afternoon sun. Around us, a layer of humanity crouched beside its varied wares—coffee, of course, for Harar is the centre of the Abyssinian trade, tobacco, oil of civet for scents, saffron for cosmetics, dyes, tallow, gums and honey. Another layer, the buyers, seemed to be standing on top of the first. Superimposed on these, were beggars whining for kat<sup>2</sup> and lepers exhibiting their stumps. Monsters, distorted by elephantiasis, trod upon the garments and the limbs of the unwary. The blind kept up a persistent wail. Flies plastered their eye-sockets. Their noses ran. Prisoners augmented the tumult with the clank of chains, which they held heaped over their arms. Couples, with their chammas<sup>3</sup> knotted together, added to the difficulty of movement. Debtor and creditor, murderer and nearest relative of the victim, they were so coupled that the accuser might assure himself of the custody of the accused until the trial.

"Come with me," said the voice at my elbow, "I will show you what goes to Arabia."

I hesitated, but curiosity conquered a lingering distaste. The clamour of the market subsided. We turned into narrow blind-walled streets where three could not walk abreast. It was Pentecost, the season of the Blessing of the Waters, and the town was crowded with "foreigners." We

<sup>1</sup> Market.

<sup>2</sup> A drug.

<sup>3</sup> Shawls worn by Christian Abyssinians.

passed Arabs, negroes and half-naked Somalis, the men clad in strips of leather or a singlet soaked in oil, the women in rags with beads and horn ornaments, their hair drawn smoothly from their foreheads and bunched in two rolls at the back of the neck. In a quiet corner, some silversmiths from Yemen carried on their trade. They were lean men, yellowed by *kat*, a drug which gives a few hours' paradise for twice as many in purgatory.

Merchants of Indian descent, distinguishable by their lack of hair and the cleanliness of their garments, mixed with Gallas, their skins oiled, their spear heads stained with blood, and Aragoubas from the hill villages, where slave-hunting is still a profitable pursuit. "Yellah, let us hurry!" said the Arab.

The gates of Harar are closed at sunset. But the crumbling walls, sandstone and granite, with bastions that defied in turn Moslem and Christian, Turk, Galla and Egyptian, for a matter of eleven centuries, are in such condition that any active robber could scale them.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the house where eunuchs are made," replied the Arab, who was called Ibn Nasir.

In spite of our haste, we made little progress, for the man doubled upon his tracks. My nose registered a succession of smells—eucalyptus, coffee, sheep's fat and eucalyptus again. Thatched huts sprang up between the square, windowless houses. Under the ramparts grew wild lilac and passion vine in fruit. Oleanders provided coloured threads in the tapestry of light and shade.

At last, assured of our confusion, the Arab's steps became purposeful. We turned into an alley, deserted except for a dog rolling in a dung-heap. At the end stood a house no different from any of the other mud-built dwellings, which shelter a mixed population, supposed to number forty-five thousand. The door yielded to a persistent knocking and we found ourselves in a passage without any light. There was a smell of flesh, goat's butter and spices. From the darkness came the whispering speech of the "Harari,"

incomprehensible to their neighbours. Then we were pushed and jostled across a number of earthen floors, till we reached a yard, agreeably cool, in which a woman seated on an angareb<sup>1</sup> was sucking a water-pipe. Some wild roses drooped over a tank. A kid played in a patch of sunlight.

The woman wore the peculiar dress of Harar. Her trousers were scarlet and tight at the ankle, her abba short-sleeved and heavily embroidered. A crimson cloak hung from her shoulders. Her head, swathed in an equally brilliant handkerchief, was the centre of innumerable plaits, stiffened into a halo. Yet she showed no traces of the placidity common to Southern Abyssinians. She might have come from a hill village. I could imagine her hands on a rifle. If she was a Moslem, she must have had difficulty in subscribing to the theory of "Maktub—it is written."

While she talked to the Arab, she sucked at her pipe with sufficient vigour to raise a cyclone in the bowl.

Ibn Nasir turned to me: "It is an old trade," he said, "and why should it suffer because foreigners set themselves against our ways? You know our proverb, 'If you would be rich, buy an Abyssinian; if you want a brother (in arms) buy a Nubian; if you require an ass, be content with a Swahili.' That is truth, but if you would have fidelity and secrecy combined, you must buy one who is not a man——"

A slave girl brought coffee. She looked stupid, faithful and content. Her lips suggested rubber tubing, but she had a lovely voice. She breathed heavily. Silver bracelets and a necklace of amulet cases gleamed against her skin.

The Arab explained the purpose of the house. In earlier centuries, Harar had supplied the black guards for harems throughout the East. She had been the most celebrated slave-mart in Africa. But the trade, recently forbidden by the Emperor, by the League of Nations and by all the forces of modernity, ranging from social opinion in the West to gunboats in the Red Sea, had been forced underground. Slaves still found their way to the coast of Arabia, but they did so secretly and with their own connivance.

<sup>1</sup> A rope bedstead.

While we drank coffee in the yard and I wondered how soon the woman would emerge from the mass of conflicting colours which imprisoned her body and exiled her spirit, Ibn Nasir continued his explanation. In olden days, it didn't matter if a lad died under the operation which would transform him from a humble shepherd at the mercy of hunger, storm and leopards on his native hills to a person of wealth and consequence in a great man's household. The supply was unlimited. Parents showed themselves anxious to secure the future of their offspring and to make a few salts, or bullets—the local coinage—in so doing. Children could be tempted by the promise of unlimited food across the water which they'd never seen. So when the village sorcerer pronounced the time propitious, the victim, often rendered unconscious by nothing more scientific than a blow on the point of the jaw, was robbed of his genital organs in the crudest possible way. Butter, brought to boiling point in a jar specially made by the magician, acted as a disinfectant. After the wound had been well smeared, poultices of herbs were applied. If, after a week, the boy still lived, congratulations showered upon his family. For a month or so, he fed on honey, raw kidneys and liver. Then, his recovery complete, he set off to join a party destined for the coast. The men responsible for the traffic treated him with the consideration due to anything with a market value of several thousand dollars. Until sea-sickness robbed him of courage, he doubtless felt he'd done well for himself and his family.

But since slave-trading had become a capital offence and, still more so, since certain Governors had begun to enforce the unpopular edict, the big men in the business realised that material must not be wasted. But without the nameless woman who was certainly not of Harar, the house in Harar could not have existed. She organised supplies. During the Christian feasts, when strangers crowded the town, parents from the wild hill-country brought their sons to the "Sitt."<sup>1</sup> If they were lucky, they went away with

<sup>1</sup> The lady.

cotton goods, flat-bladed knives and Maria Theresa dollars. But the Sitt bought only the best. No weakling entered her house and few corpses were smuggled out of it in sacks or bundles of faggots.

The village sorcerer paid for every successful operation with two or three failures. The Sitt used an anæsthetic made from an infusion of poppies and kat. Her methods were delicate and comparatively hygienic.

When I felt I couldn't drink any more coffee, mixed with spices that made me sick, or listen any longer to a description that had an even worse effect, I asked if there were any boys in the house at the moment.

The Sitt replied with a monosyllable to Ibn Nasir's speech. "She says 'yes,'" translated the Arab. Silence followed. Then the woman rose. The cloak slipped from her shoulders. Unembarrassed, she walked ahead of us into the house. The kid followed, leaping against our legs and pretending to the possession of full-grown horns.

I don't know what I expected to see. Nausea shook the pit of my stomach. My throat felt dry. Prepared for any horror, I stumbled after the others. Then I realised the commonplace aspect of the house. We passed a yard where a couple of lads were moulding slabs of cow-dung. They sang as they worked and Ibn Nasir said it was the tale of a shepherd guarding his zariba against hyena and leopards.

A smell of rancid butter, sour milk, hides and earth drifted out of a neighbouring shed. In it, the slave girl squatted on her heels beside a dung fire. Between her feet, she gripped a curved knife, the blade uppermost. Pressing the meat upon it, she cut off strip after strip and tossed them into a pan. A boy, aged perhaps ten or eleven, naked but for a loin-cloth, alternately blew upon the fire and stirred the simmering stew. Scattered about the dwelling and intent on equally innocuous domestic occupations were other youths, ranging to the threshold of manhood. The oldest thought he was fifteen, at which age, had he been left intact, he could have carried a rifle on a tribal raid, or



accompanied the elephant hunter with his gembiah.<sup>1</sup> The smallest child, his face smeared with the remains of his last meal, began to play with the kid. I left them butting each other lustily. "He also is a castrate," said Ibn Nasir. A smile split the leather of his face. "He will never be tempted by women. So will he escape much trouble."

In the yard, where the water-pipe still stood beside the angareb, the Sitt leaned against a wall in the immemorial attitude of the East, but her eyes moved as quickly as a lizard's. She spoke to the Arab and he translated. "When the town empties after the feast, the boys will go, not all together. But there will be so many returning to their villages. Who would notice?"

"And their destination?" I asked.

Ibn Nasir's eyes narrowed. "Tajura, Obek, Assab," he mentioned several parts on the Red Sea. "It is not good to be too sure."

In most cases the slaves who find their way to Arabia do all but guide the party with which they travel. For they are escaping the starvation of their hills or deserts for a land of plenty, where they will be able to eat as much as they like. Consequently, they are generally quite as anxious to reach their destination as their temporary owners are to hide them on the way. I've known a whole caravan disappear into the trees of Kunni in Southern Abyssinia, displaying the agility of monkeys, when warned of the approach of a local official. I've watched the crew of a dhow anchored off the Dahalak Islands<sup>2</sup> walk about on top of the tarpaulin which presumably covered their merchandise, or provisions, and known that under it huddled half a dozen slaves, terrified lest they should be discovered by a patrol and thus deprived of the promised land.

Max Grühl in his *Citadel of Ethiopia* describes a caravan in chains on its way to Kaffa in South-Western Abyssinia. He also saw a Shankalla woman in Addis Ababa who had been branded on her breasts and arms "to increase their strength." M. Kessel in *Le Matin* tells of a child flogged to

<sup>1</sup> A curved knife.

<sup>2</sup> In the Red Sea.

death in Tighe (Abyssinia), but I have never seen a slave ill-treated.

By law and custom, Abyssinia has always been against the trade, although slavery as a domestic institution is accepted as a matter of course. As in Arabia, there can be no household without its slaves and I've never travelled with a caravan, or a dhow's crew, that did not include one or more slaves.

On the other hand, the trade which used to provide the Dankalis, masters of the desert route to the coast, with a satisfactory yearly revenue, is becoming more and more difficult. In spite of all obstacles, however, four classes of human merchandise are smuggled by night in swift, light dhows, travelling without papers or ballast, to the markets of Hedjaz and Asir.

Castrated boys fetch the highest prices and they rise to the highest positions, for every Arab of importance has a confidential "wakil," or man of business, who is not a man at all. In Yemen, I travelled with one such. He rode, unarmed, in purple silk, and was received everywhere with honour, by tribesmen who despise the weaponless classes. Among these, they rank Jews, women and barbers, but not eunuchs.

Girls, chosen for beauty of limb and carriage, go to the harems of Arabia, where they bear their lords free sons and daughters. They have the same privileges as wives and as much freedom as any veiled woman.

The third class consists of blacks who can be trained as warriors. Throughout Arabia and North Africa, these are a privileged order who look down upon servants, artisans and tradesmen. They swagger around, conscious of their courage and position, quick to take offence, but loyal to their last drop of blood and ready to shed it for their masters. A Senussi Emir once lent me a guard of such fighting slaves. They travelled with me for 1,200 miles across the Libyan Desert and kept the free Bedouins in order. They obeyed only their officer and were ready to face anything from three days without water to attack at the end of a seventeen-hour march.

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The simplest class of slaves become household workers, or more often drones, sitting about the courts, eating heartily, carrying messages when necessary, delighting in intrigue and adding by their numbers to their masters' prestige. Sometimes they learn trades, and in Arabia you meet them as smiths, weavers, basket-makers and metal-workers.

The majority of slaves come from such tribes as the Shankalla, Gouragays, Wallamas and Sidam, who inhabit deserts west of Abyssinia on the edge of the Sudan. Some are reft from British territory near Lake Rudolph.

Among the Gallas and especially the Aragoubas, whose fortified stone villages overlook the desert, there are hunters accustomed to fighting wild beasts. These men are sufficiently courageous to attack the lion, or even the elephant, with no better weapon than a spear or a knife. Yet they are not too proud to stalk children, straggling behind their goats. They half stifle their victims in a length of calico, carry them off as if they were sacks, hide them in earthen pits roofed with leaves and sell them, eventually, to an Arab dealer for thirty or forty pounds.

But, generally, it is a matter of negotiation. The poorer and more prolific tribes, owning a minimum of cattle and unable to cultivate much grain, are delighted to sell their teeming offspring. The local headman receives the traders and in exchange for coin, or commodities needed in the desert, he provides any number of boys and girls, who set out for the nearest Aragouba village, convinced that an honour has been done them.

They rest for a few days in the walled compounds provided with cellars that can be roofed in and hidden under mats or branches, should hostile enquiry be made. When sufficient slaves have been collected, a caravan is formed. The Aragouba merchants who have bought from Abyssinian traders, accompany their wares to the Dankali frontier, paying a tax to every chief on the way. The hardest marches lead across the Dankali desert to scraps of villages flattened in the sand. To these, come Arabs with bales of cotton, with weapons, ammunition, copper-leaf and

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drugs, in payment for the slaves, or "mules" as they are called in the trade. Thereafter, small parties creep down to the sea by secret paths. A smoke signal shows against the sunset. A dhow, which has been hanging about on the pretence of fishing, mending a sail, or caulking the hull, slips through the reef on a moonless night. The slaves embark and then, if a gunboat becomes too inquisitive, they are members of the crew unless, of course, they are helplessly seasick under the rudder platform.

The first time I came across a slave caravan was between Lalibela and Gondar, too far north for the ordinary traffic. I had ridden some five hundred miles from Addis Ababa<sup>1</sup> with a mule caravan, the remnants of which could scarcely stand. The backs of our pack animals were in ribbons. Crocodiles had deprived us of our best guide while crossing the Takkazye river.

We were delighted, therefore, when one Woldo Sabat said that he could take us by a short cut across 140 miles of officially routeless mountains so that we should reach Gondar in nine days.

The first two marches were not particularly difficult, although thorns forced us from our saddles. Each night we camped beside a few huts, huddled on a hill-side, and named after their dilapidated churches—"Mary," or "George," or "The Trinity."

The Abyssinians argued about money, food and robbers. They refused to share my stale bread because it was a fast and I'd offered it to them with fingers which had touched meat. But they got as drunk as possible on tedj provided by unexpectedly hospitable headmen.

As we left the second village, two ill-conditioned creatures with rifles pattered after us. "We have come to save you from brigands. There is a band in the next mountain with seventy-two rifles."

"I think," said the only Arab in the party, "that if we take these men with us the robbers will soon have seventy-four!"

<sup>1</sup> The capital of Abyssinia.

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We saw no living creature that day, except a baboon which barked warning of our approach. We could hear his followers crashing away through the bush.

Under a torrid sun, we laboured up and down what seemed to be mountains of loose stones, red hot and pinned together with thorns. If there was a track, nobody but Woldo Sabat could see it.

On the steep slopes, we were obliged to crawl on hands and knees under a curtain of two-inch spikes. My leather coat was ripped. My hat looked like a pin-cushion.

In the dry river-beds, we clattered from rock to rock until our boots gave way.

When, at last, we reached a flat space devoid of vegetation our one idea was to lie down. Sunset found us still stretched there, without sufficient energy to put up the tents.

The next day was worse. And when evening came Woldo Sabat acknowledged he'd lost the track.

In silence we pitched camp. From the opening of my tent, I looked across a desert land, older in its parched greyness than anything I've seen outside the gum bush in Australia. The grass was colourless and the whole country bleached and sapless. Rocks and shrivelled trees looked like rags, wrung in the mangle of drought, shrunk and discoloured by the sun. We sat on rocks reminiscent of oven lids and ate a tasteless mess which the cook called rice.

When the moon rose, I said we must reconnoitre, but nobody volunteered to come with me. "The mules are lame. To-morrow they are dead," said the chief nagadi,<sup>1</sup> who regarded every one of his beasts as a personal enemy.

Hasen announced that Woldo Sabat had been a slave-trader: "So all his roads go round, Tamallas!<sup>1</sup> He know only long roads with no villages, only rocks and rivers, with no water." He drew breath, convinced that he had expressed himself admirably in the English, which he always treated as if it were a sponge.

<sup>1</sup> Muleteer.

<sup>2</sup> "It turns" or "They turn."

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"In that case," I said firmly, "he cannot be frightened of the bush." Sixteen voices protested. They talked, as usual, of robbers, but I insisted that the cause of our present misery should accompany me in search of a solution.

The Abyssinian provided himself with a rifle. Unwillingly he followed me across slope after slope of spiked grass. We had to find a way round the thorn bushes, silvered into blossom by the moonlight. As we neared the top of a steeper rise and I looked round to see if our fire was still visible, Woldo Sabat touched my elbow: "There are men on the other side," he said.

I'd heard nothing, but Woldo repeated in a whisper, "It is a large party. Robbers. They will kill us."

For a moment I stood there, impressed by the man's fear and by the memory of all the tales told us by village headmen. Then I realised we couldn't be much worse off than we already were, for we had no water and only a general idea that Gondar lay on the other side of ranges as unsurmountable as a rampart bristling with spears. So I went to the top of the rise, where I must have been clearly visible. Yet still I could neither see nor hear anything suggesting a human presence. Below me, the grey bushes alternated with hummocks of earth. A few trees showed curiously swollen trunks. Then one of the hummocks moved and I saw it was a man with an earth-coloured chamma over his head. From the nearest trunk, a figure detached itself. It held a rifle. I looked round for Woldo Sabat. With the agility of a snake, he was wriggling, flat upon his stomach, into the long grass.

I called to him furiously, but it had no effect.

The sound of a strange voice roused the hummocks. They were lean men, dark and weather-beaten, as different from the soft Northern Abyssinians, who are only happy when arguing or eating, as steel wire from cheese.

The rifleman spoke to me in Arabic and I explained what had happened to us. Immediately, a couple of the strangers slipped behind me. I thought with satisfaction that Woldo's freedom would be brief.

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The speaker of Arabic signed to me to follow him. Passing a little distance, we came to a tree under which a man waited. He had apparently been sleeping, rolled in a blanket, and had roused himself at our approach. A water-pipe and a couple of holsters lay beside him. Somewhere in the vicinity, mules kicked and pulled at their heel-ropes. Apparently it was a large camp.

Explanations became involved. I accounted for my presence in what I hoped were well chosen words. The man under the tree, whom the others addressed as Sheikh, or Sidi (My master), informed me that he was a merchant travelling to the coast of Eritrea. But when I looked round for the unwieldy bales with which such a caravan should have been provided, I could see nothing.

We sat on the blanket and talked. A rifleman, swathed from shoulder to knee in a chamma, brought coffee. It was so bitter that I wondered if it had been tugged. Then Woldo Sabat appeared between two of the strangers and his first words provided the information I needed. Swearing by a Christian saint, he exclaimed "It is a slave caravan! Mary save us, we shall leave our bones in this place!"

"Don't be silly," I said. "We've nearly as many rifles as they have."

But it wasn't our arms which saved us that night. We had salt and the slavers were short of it. In exchange for two porters' loads,<sup>2</sup> they agreed to let us travel with them to within forty-eight hours of Gondar, when their route would strike eastwards, across mountain and desert, till, at last, they could creep down to some unfrequented inlet between Eid and Massawa.

So it happened that, for six days, we travelled with slavers by the hidden paths which slipped through the forests of Lasta, like a skein of silk untwisted. We drank their milk, for they had goats with them, and occasionally a gulp of spicy hot "keshir," more potent than the

<sup>1</sup> Shelter.

<sup>2</sup> A porter can carry six large slabs, representing 18s. worth of purchasing power.

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Abyssinian tedj.<sup>1</sup> They ate our rice and laughed at our nagadis' terrors.

The human "mules" were friendly. There were about twenty of them, admirably built young women, copper-brown in colour, and some boys with thick lips and slightly flattened foreheads. They worked about the camp in the most cheerful fashion, helping to build the thorn zariba which sheltered them at night, and gathering wood for fire.

We were still far west of the Dankali country, yet one of these desert men travelled with the "boguls."<sup>2</sup> Every morning he mixed himself a supply of ashes and tobacco to chew during the day, and after that we saw him no more till the party camped at night. We marched by slow stages, so as not to tire the slaves, who had already been fifty days on the road and would not see the coast for another month. When the sun sank into a haze of dust, heat and dry scrub, we gathered into two parties, and the Arabs were always the quicker with their preparations. While our muleteers struggled with tents and ropes, and our cook became hysterical over lost utensils, the traders sat down to a meal of parched durra,<sup>3</sup> with meat, if some animal of the forest had been killed. The slaves made themselves a paste of the dates specially carried for them.

They received the best of everything, because they represented hard cash and, perhaps, also, because the Arab, by custom, is kind to women and children. For them, the shelter at night, which provided some protection against the sudden storms, while the guards slept in the open, a rifle under each man's hand. For them, also, the yield of goat's milk and whatever humble luxuries came out of the mule sacks. In fact, on several occasions, I found our precious rice being distributed among them, instead of going to the Sheikh's platter as I'd intended.

The result was that I forgot the condition and destination of the girls who walked sturdily through the bush in spite of the unaccustomed sandals on their feet. They wore the

<sup>1</sup> Ale.

<sup>2</sup> Mules (human).

<sup>3</sup> Millet.



usual futah, a knee-length skirt, with a strip of dirty calico slung cape-wise across their shoulders, and they possessed necklaces of bone, or strips of hide. Serious, they extracted thorns. Smiling, they stuck leaves into their nostrils. And sometimes, in the evening, they huddled together, singing in a monotonously nasal rhythm which reminded me of wind in dry grass.

One day, the tallest girl, whose body fell into exquisite poses, stood in front of my tent, propped upon her own backbone, since there was nothing else to lean against, and talked to me through the Arab who accompanied our own party. Like all dwellers in space, she concerned herself with whence we came and whither we went. We explained as well as we could our origin and our destination. I demanded the same information with regard to herself. The girl looked suspicious. But she replied that she'd come from far west. A raising of the chin towards the setting sun indicated distance. She'd been glad to leave the desert, where her people wasted, so that their limbs became as sticks. She'd never had so much food in her life. Placing her hand upon her stomach, she showed a satisfactory fullness. Every year merchants arrived in the desert from the "houses made of stone," and bought according to the state of the harvest. I gathered the supply was always greater than the demand.

"You didn't mind leaving your people?" I asked.

I don't know if she understood. The Arab translated her reply as: "She says she worked like a camel and was beaten like a dog."

For her, slavery meant exchanging the mastership of a half-starving father, or husband, for that of a man who would give her food, clothing and a certainty of existence. She asked me if I had a master, and then, bewildered by my independence, if I would buy her. She was strong and she would work well, if I would give her lots of "the sweet, red stuff," which happened to be my last pot of jam.

I begged the interpreter to explain that there were no slaves in my country.

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The girl listened, with a lovely intentness. Then she dropped on to her heels and stared at me, with her head thrown back. "She doesn't understand," said the Arab.

"Well, make her understand," I retorted, feeling Western and aggressive.

An argument followed. Then the Arab translated. "What do you do in your country when there is no grain and you're hungry?" The question remained unanswered.

On a totally different occasion, I saw another stage of the trade which begins in desert Africa and ends within the blind white walls of Arabian cities. I was crossing the Red Sea from the Sudan to the forbidden part of Jeizan. Without papers or ballast, but with the connivance of an amused official, I slipped away in the middle of the night. And thereafter, for the fourteen days which I spent battling against the south wind in an open dhow, I was just as anxious to avoid patrolling gunboats as any slaver north of Bab-el-Mandeb. I had a crew of eight Arabs, one of whom was a slave. Only the *Rais*<sup>1</sup> had made the journey before, and that forty years ago. We had the Admiralty charts and the *Red Sea Pilot*, but none of these were much good where the reef was concerned.

The first sunset found us anchored in the lee of the islets Tella Keber and Tella Szerir, and the south wind kept us there, rolling helplessly in company with several other sambukhs,<sup>2</sup> for two days. Then we beat our way slowly down the coast, limping at night into the protection of the reef, starting each dawn with a cry of "Alú Allah! Alú Allah!" ("The sails, oh God!") and thankful if in the teeth of the azzieb<sup>3</sup> we make between twelve and twenty miles a day.

So it happened that at 11 a.m. on the ninth day, having picked up the light of Difnein fourteen hours earlier, we came to a group of islands with a curious coral formation, shaped like a giant T. Upon which the *Rais* announced that he'd lost his usual sense of direction and hadn't any

<sup>1</sup> Captain.

<sup>2</sup> Boats.

<sup>3</sup> A south wind.

ideas about the locality in which we found ourselves, unless perhaps we were at Kad-hu.

Fortified by the charts, I disagreed.

So far as I remember, we argued most of the day. Then a sail appeared and we hoped for information, but the strange dhow, travelling light, with a large spread of canvas, veered away into the night.

"She's making for Harmil," I said, and next morning I plotted what I imagined to be our position, took a bearing on Harmil from the chart and kept to this course in spite of the protests of the crew.

"At sea there is no need for books," said Saeed. "We look at the sun and the stars, and near the reef, we pray." But he was as thankful as the rest when, towards sunset, Harmil duly appeared—after considerable suspense caused by unidentified rocks.

The wind was blowing up for a gale, so we tacked to leeward of the island, and there, within the reef, we found the strange dhow, swinging gently, while her crew fished in the shallows with a lead-weighted net. Our arrival caused a certain amount of disturbance. Half-naked figures leaped and scrambled from the rudder platform, where they'd been idling. Head first, they sought shelter amidst a swirl of bilge water and the indescribable filth of the hull. A huri<sup>1</sup> put out and paddled rapidly towards us.

Our Rais regarded the craft with interest. "Slavers," he said, "but Allah is generous. We have rifles."

By the time the huri drew alongside, we presented a martial appearance. But our preparations proved unnecessary. The Arabs only wanted to know our business, and when they discovered it to be as unofficial as their own, they offered us some of their catch.

Half an hour later we were ashore, eating fried fish and drinking rather salt tea with the crew of a slave dhow and its cargo. Some of the latter were sick. Their eyes rolled towards the land, still several days distant. They were of a pronounced negro type and their skins looked bluish-grey

<sup>1</sup> A canoe made from a hollow tree trunk.

## THE SLAVE TRADE

round the nostrils, until, refreshed by a meal on solid ground, they cheered up and began to talk.

There were two women among them, one about twenty and the other considerably younger. Balanced on their heels, with their backs to the sea, they gazed, without expression, at the sandy ridge which limited the view.

But the boys laughed, and when I let one of them try my revolver, he told us he intended to be a warrior and kill men instead of leopards.

The Rais of the slave dhow encouraged him. "He will be strong as a lion when his belly is full. Look at him now. I shall get good money for him."

Apparently the captain's brother was a merchant in Yemen. Together they carried on a profitable business. The sailor brought his wares across the Red Sea by the least-frequented routes, running the gauntlet of customs patrols, of gunboats in search of such illicit cargoes, and of pirates equally voracious. The merchant, living in a vast and rambling house, its courts crowded with wives, slaves and dependants, received the newcomers within its walls. For a while, they were lost among innumerable other blacks. Then they were offered for sale, privately. The young men who could be trained to arms fetched about four hundred silver dollars, children half as much. "But she with the eyes of a gazelle," concluded the Rais, pointing to the younger girl, "will make me rich." He signalled to her to stand up. Indifferent, with her dirty futah blown about her limbs, she stood in the fading light. "Wallahi, she is beautiful and worth more than five hundred dollars."

A statue of smooth bronze, small-breasted, but with gentle curves about her shoulders, hips and thighs, the girl remained, silhouetted against the sea.

Late that night I woke, cramped between a keg of water and the rail of the rudder platform. Round me lay half a dozen dark shapes, more or less naked. The Rais had dragged what looked like a tattered red petticoat over his shoulders. Saeed reclined with his head among the ashes, where a coffee-pot rolled on its side.

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

The moon had set. Sea and sky merged. The island appeared to have been bleached. For a moment I watched our mast swinging against the grey tissue of the night. Then I saw the slave dhow. She'd hoisted sail. Silent as a shadow, she slid out of the reef. There was no movement on her deck. But, below it, sleeping or waking, exiles from the land attempted to adapt themselves to the sea, which they believed the high road to fortune—or to food.

## THE SLAVE MARKET

### *Arabia*

I WAS looking for the British Consulate in Jedda. That's what makes it so inapposite. For to find—and lose—a slave who might quite well have been a European, within a few hundred yards of the Lion, both British and rampant, is something of an adventure.

It was the beginning of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Camels crowded the streets and in every patch of shade Bedouin drivers sucked their water-pipes while they discussed the prospects of the season. From alleys and archways came the grunts of beasts, protesting against their loads, and the raucous arguments of the pilgrims. It seemed impossible that human voices could make so much noise. But the inhabitants of Jedda remained unmoved. Most of them seemed to be asleep on rope bedsteads set beside the doors of their houses.

Occasionally a shugduf<sup>1</sup> swayed round a corner and the passengers balanced within it added their cries to the general clamour. A few women lingered in the market, but nothing could be seen of them. For their garments were as tents, inside which they moved without shape or sound. Even their eyes were hidden by a stiffly starched veil hanging to the knees.

I was wearing the pilgrim dress, which consists of a calico nightgown and a sheet over the head. The sandals were not conducive to comfort and very soon I had a blister on each heel. The heat swelled like a river in flood. It beat

<sup>1</sup> A camel litter.

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

against me and glued the coarse garments to my limbs. Sweat trickled down my face and lodged in the hollow of my neck. I would have given anything for a bath, but ablutions are strictly forbidden after the "ihram"<sup>1</sup> has been assumed. So I continued on my way, asking directions of all manner of people, but most of them were foreigners, Javanese, Indians and Africans, who had no knowledge of Jedda. At one moment I found myself in a byway carpeted with melons, dates and sheets of bread. At the next, I was in an open square with a minaret rising above the roofs and a mosque crumpled in the corner. Finally, I realised the futility of wandering about in circles, so I knocked at the door of a house which had a street to itself. Interminable walls enclosed what must have been a garden. I had a glimpse of scarlet flowers nodding at the top of a branch before the door opened and a negro asked my business.

Apparently, I failed to explain it, for, within a few minutes, I found myself in an inner court talking to a pleasant young woman who regarded me with pity and dismay. Holiness was all very well, she evidently felt, but it should not lead so distinguished a personage into such a plight! Curious and very polite, she led me to a seat and ordered an elderly female in a loose print gown and something resembling a mob cap, to dust my clothes. After a number of questions, she elicited the object of my quest, upon which she laughed and took me into a large, airy room with balconies protected by wooden lattices. From one of these she pointed to the Union Jack, drooping over an adjacent roof, but she wouldn't hear of my leaving. Was it not the hottest hour of the day? Should I not rest and refresh myself and later, when the sun had passed, she would send a slave to show me the way. So I loosed the veil, which I should not have been wearing at all, for, during the pilgrimage, a man's thoughts must be so pure that he can look unmoved upon all manner of female faces . . . but not, I thought, without superfluous curiosity, upon such an innovation as a white skin among brown,

<sup>1</sup> Pilgrim dress.

## THE SLAVE MARKET

black and yellow. My hostess settled me on a divan with a bolster at my back and called for tea. Tucking her feet under her, she sat upright opposite me and began to ask questions.

I told her I'd come from Egypt, that I lodged with the Mutowif,<sup>1</sup> Bakr Hanowi, preparatory to starting for Mecca, and that my servant, Bahiya, had fever, which last fact obliged me to go out alone.

The woman made no attempt to hide her disapproval. "I have never left this house," she said, "except to accompany my master to Taif, where the sun is a caress instead of a blow and the fruits have such taste that you would not believe."

Until then, I'd imagined her the wife or daughter of the owner of the house, but from the use of the word "master" instead of "lord," I gathered she was a slave. So I asked if she'd been born in Jedda. She thought not, but she'd been bought as a child, and knew nothing of her history.

"You do not come from the mountains across the sea," I said, referring to Abyssinia, for the girl was olive-skinned, of the type one sees—and disbelieves—in old Persian miniatures.

The woman shook her head and gestured vaguely towards the horizon, before touching her face as if it gave her pleasure. "There is one much whiter than I am—white as your sister——" she began, and then an obvious Ethiopian appeared with a tray.

While we drank unpleasantly sweet tea and ate sticky biscuits, I asked about the person to whom she'd alluded. "Is she a wife—from my country, perhaps?"

"No, she is a slave, but preferred of my master. She is very beautiful——" and at that moment, the curtains parted and a girl who might have been born anywhere north of the Mediterranean, north even of the English Channel, came into the room. She had a clear, colourless skin and light brown hair. She looked tired. There were smudges under her eyes. Showing neither surprise nor interest, she came

<sup>1</sup> Pilgrim guide.



across to us and sank on to the divan. A couple of Ethiopians busied themselves about her comfort.

The girl drooped against her pillows. She looked young and illogically dissipated, but when her eyes met mine, they were full of content. Clear gold they were. I've never seen anything quite like them.

She wore only a transparent muslin corselet which left her breasts bare, and a length of silk, blue and rose, wound about her hips.

With a smile, the brown woman took one of her wrists and pushed back the bracelets, of which there were a great number. Under them the flesh was swollen and grooved with the marks of cords, or chains. "Marhaba, thou art indeed to be envied," she murmured, but the girl pulled away her wrist, and one of the blacks began to massage it with practised fingers.

More tea came, flavoured this time with mint. Stooping to take a cup, the girl whom they called Selmag, an unusual name in the Hedjaz, revealed her back under the strip of muslin which only half covered it. Red marks made a lattice across it. The slaves displayed no interest, but I drew in my breath, sharply.

The brown woman looked up. "She has been with her master," she explained, as if it were sufficient.

In a voice which I hoped sounded natural, I asked if the girl had been beaten. "Of course. It is to be seen."

"But doesn't she mind?" I asked, and for the first time the others looked at me as if I were a stranger.

"Wallahi!" explained the brown woman. "Have you not been beaten yourself? Or are Egyptians so careless of their women that they leave them untrained?" But there was suspicion in her eyes.

Conscious of the difference of race and with it the abyss between our points of view, I muttered something about progress in Egypt and hurried into an account of how Cairene women walked in the streets with veils that hid nothing at all. And as I talked I saw the four faces close. It was not that they became hostile, but their owners

couldn't understand the meaning of what I sought to portray.

The brown woman, by far the most intelligent, made an effort. "What has progress to do with a master and his slave?" she asked, but when she saw my eyes riveted on the marks of the *chifra*,<sup>1</sup> she protested. "Is it that you know nothing at all in Egypt?"

Momentarily, speech failed me. I remembered only the wife of a Lincolnshire poacher protesting that her husband must have ceased to love her because he no longer beat her.

Then it occurred to me that the girl with eyes the colour of willow catkins had said nothing at all, so I asked her from where she came and how long she'd been in Jedda, and I'd the greatest difficulty in not speaking English. I couldn't believe the answer would be in Arabic. Whatever it was, I couldn't understand it. One of the blacks explained that the "white one" had been bought about a year ago in the *Suq el Abid*<sup>2</sup> in Mecca, and while she spoke she continued her deft rubbing.

We talked again about Cairo, but with everything I said I realised I was adding to the conviction of my companions. Henceforth they would consider Egypt an uncivilised land where the men were ignorant and the women savages.

"It is against the law to beat a slave—" I concluded, foolish and sententious.

"How then can she give, or gain pleasure?" asked the brown woman with as much bewilderment as an English governess might display on being told that her charges must learn to play tennis blindfold.

While I remained in Jedda, I went several times to the house with a street of its own. I was received with courtesy, but I had the idea that the women who, during my later visits, crowded the great room, came to look upon a barbarian, whose simplicity diverted them, although they were too polite to show it. I never saw Selmag again.

When I asked for her, I was told she could not come.

<sup>1</sup> A whip.

<sup>2</sup> Slave market.

so that perfume trickled down our clothes and ashes blew into our eyes. A girl, running in with a mass of bolsters, tripped over a water-pipe and fell full length. She was pulled to her feet, dusted, abused, comforted, and told: "How can you expect to give pleasure to my lord, if you are clumsy as a goat in labour?"

After hours of hard work and several false alarms—"Wallahi! I see his camels on the dune! Where is that quilt, Bahia? Take heed now, lest you spill the coffee! Maryam, Maryam, is the sheesha<sup>1</sup> prepared?"—the vast apartment was ready for the occupation of a Bedouin. The best sheepskins made a snow-drift on the divans, and an array of weapons decorated the walls. Between them hung enamel bowls of every size and colour. I counted 195 in a frieze above the windows. And the jars, saucepan lids, dishes and jugs which patterned the rest of the walls would have supplied sufficient crockery for a provincial store. A spiral of smoke drifted from the coffee-hearth. The smell of incense obliterated any other odour. The cat had been chased out of the room, and a beautifully wrought silver basin, with a ewer to match, stood in the corner. A silk napkin lay beside it, but the slab of violently pink soap smelled of tallow.

The Sheikh's wife poked here and there, before murmuring her satisfaction. Then she hurried across the roofs, her sandals flapping, her toe-rings glinting in the sun, to superintend the baking and roasting and spicing to which innumerable hands contributed.

At that moment, I was kneeling beside a charcoal rolling out thin sheets of batter. The coal-black Mary took them from me, soaked them in oil and handed them. Fadda, whose bracelets clattered as she twisted them deft into cones and passed them to the little Sherifa to fill mincemeat and raisins. So we worked, and our time moved quicker than our hands. Would it be Nazek's fortune to be sent to the lord of Beni Abs and if she pleased him, would he take her to the desert?

<sup>1</sup> Water-pipe.

"Marhaba, she would make a fine Bedouin, the bold one!" laughed a girl of sixteen who expected her first child.

A sudden wail diverted our attention. Fatma, aged fourteen, had struck Nazek across the face. Her victim replied by tugging out a freshly dyed pink lock. Fatma's shriek preluded a battle in which the girls displayed the agility of cats. They rolled in the sand which always carpeted the roofs, scratching, slapping and biting. A little imagination

made them spit like the animals they resembled. For a moment the women watched, amused. Then the Sheikh's daughter-in-law screamed. "Take care, take care! They will mark each other, and how then will they be fit for my lord's use?"

The suggestion acted on the indolent women like wind on cornfield. They bent before it. In a moment the girls were flung apart, thoroughly shaken, threatened with cords and hustled into different corners of the roof.

Nazek, trembling a little, crouched beside me. "Am I marked?" she asked, fingering her face.

"No."

"Allah be praised!"

"But what was it all about?"

"That ghoul of a Fatma boasted of her right to go to my lord's guest to-night. Because she is six months younger than me and thin as a snake's skeleton! Would any man find comfort there? Allah save us! He would be speared for her bones." Nazek cupped her own breasts in slim, brown hands. They showed plainly between the embroidered edges of her waistcoat which had been torn open. She flung back the sleeves of her abba to show us her arms, and stretching out a leg, indicated the roundness of hip and thigh.

The other women agreed. "She is appetising," they said, "and when she has been properly prepared, she will be as beautiful as a bride——"

Until then, I had been affected by the atmosphere of excited anticipation, but when, peering through the fretwork of a parapet, we caught a glimpse of the Sheikh of

Beni Abs dismounting from a lean mountain-bred camel, it occurred to me that he was a stranger and that the girl might spend one night with him and be condemned to virginity for the rest of her life, unless she were subsequently married to a slave. In which case, her children would belong to their mutual master.

"D'you really want to go to a man you've never seen?" I began crossly, and found the women gaping. "How could she have seen him?" they protested, shocked. "She is not a slut of the areesh" (the reed huts where, on rare occasions, a woman from the coast may be found dispensing her favours to travellers).

Once again, I stared at the "closed" faces of women ranged in defence of what had always been. The moment passed and with it the expressions, varying from surprise to dismay, but equally shuttered, for the instant an Arab senses something contrary to custom and tradition, she looks at the aggressor through the veil of her own mentality, which is denser than silk or calico.

Nazek protested, her lips parted, her eyes gleaming "To-morrow, by the mercy of Allah, I shall be a woman."

"It is the choice of my lord," reproved the Sheikh's wife and one of her daughters teased, "It is possible my father may wish to keep so succulent a morsel for his own pleasure."

Nazek flung round so that her anklets tinkled. "He has no eyes to see me. His sunshine is the smile of the Circassian——"

Speculation continued over the platters of rice and mutton which came to the women's roof after the men eaten. Fortunately, since Fatma showed signs of wishing to settle the matter with her nails, the repelition followi heavy meal was interrupted by the appearance of Saeed.

The mother of seven living sons rose to her feet as quickly as any girl on the roof. With her head and her knee bent, she stood in front of the man to whom been married as a child of thirteen. When he spoke to

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she stooped with the ease of long practice and kissed his knee.

The Sheikh seated himself upon a bench covered with a mattress and immediately the women surrounded him. Wives and daughters touched their lips to his abbaya.<sup>1</sup> Slaves prostrated themselves to kiss his feet. An old woman, gracious and slight, with a transparent scarf wound round her head and a thin white abba over tight-fitting trousers, approached and made as if to salute his shoulder. But before she could do so, the Sheikh took her by the hand and kissed her on the forehead. "Allah make you strong, my mother," he said.

While he patted the heads bowed before him, with indiscriminate kindness, a burble of voices broke out, but Sheikh Saeed listened only to his wife. His guest had retired to the chamber walled with crockery. In his own room, where the furniture consisted of a hard divan, a water-pipe, a rifle and two golden daggers, gift of the Emir Idris, a Circassian waited for him. Hastily he took council of the matron whose necklaces clattered with every breath.

She was pulled forward and her meliya<sup>2</sup> removed. Acquiescent, she crouched in front of her master, while he laid his hand over her shoulders as if they'd been the ribs of a horse. In response to his order, she stood upright, letting her garments fall to the hips, so that she looked like a stripped branch rising above the reds and blues of flowering creepers. Impersonally, the Sheikh regarded her. Then he smiled, patted her arm and told her bring happiness to his guest.

In a passion of gratitude, Nazek flung herself at his feet and pressed her forehead to them.

So, in desert Habi, a girl passed from the ownership of a man who'd bought her as a child in a shuttered house off the Meccan Suq el Abid to that of a Bedouin, who took her away with him next day in a curtained litter, swaying above the hump of a camel. But she went of her own free will and she had her moment of glory. For the rest of that day

<sup>1</sup> Cloak.

<sup>2</sup> Outer garment.

belonged to her. Every woman in the household obeyed her orders. Friendly villagers sat round her staring while Sheikh Saeed's eldest daughter plucked her eyebrows, substituting two long bars of paint. The niece betrothed to a kinsman of Beni Abs, applied kohol to her eyes, inside the lids, between eyelashes and eyeball, so that the irritation produced a liquid effect. The mother of the Sheikh watched with absorbed interest while Fatma, generous in her defeat, steeped the toes of her rival in scented scarlet and accentuated the necklaces of Venus on her throat with a reed soaked in kohol. Later on, bathed, massaged and painted, with new silk wound about her hips, her breasts hidden under the golden jewellery contributed by the household and her arms stiffened by the weight of coin bracelets, she waited surrounded by awed women. In response to a whispered summons, she would go alone, in the moonlight, across the deserted roofs, to the room smelling of incense and new sheepskins. But would she return in the morning, a person of less account than she was to-day, or would she set forth on her life's journey, surrounded by approval and envy? Nazek must have been frightened. For the ignorance of protracted virginity is the skeleton in harem cupboard.

But, when the fifth glass of scented tea had been fath and silence fell upon the circle, the Circassian came, heavy-eyed, with bruises on her wrists and ankles. With a gentle interest, she studied the girl who scarcely dared to breathe for fear of disarranging her appearance. Drawing a pencil-thin flask from her girdle, she rubbed a few drops on the neophyte's throat and forehead. "So is your journey assured. To-morrow you will travel with your master."

Nazek's eyes burned. "If it be written——" she said, catching at the scraps of Moslem teaching accorded to women.

The Circassian smiled. "The Koran is for men," she retorted, "but this——" indicating the phial, "is the wisdom of Allah in women. Thy success is written sweetness on thy skin."

She prophesied truly. Next morning, stirred and excited,

## THE SLAVE MARKET

I leaned over the parapet, regardless of the Sheikh's wife tugging at my abba, and watched Nazek's litter bumping at the end of the caravan, until it disappeared behind a ridge of sand.

In Yemen the sale of a woman slave is generally arranged over cups of tea, during the period of expansion and ease which follows the mastication of kat. But in Meidi, while staying in the house of a Hadramauti merchant, I witnessed what might be called a market. A few days previously, the crowd of slaves, servants and retainers had been augmented by the arrival of a dozen blacks, whose uncouth manners amused the household. The young women were averse to covering their faces. The boys didn't know the meaning of civility. There were a good many squabbles, especially as newcomers understood only a few words of Arabic.

One morning, rumour spread through the harem that strangers were to be disposed of to merchants from the interior.

In my company with every woman of the house, I crouched behind the lattices commanding a court where the visitors were being entertained. They were lean, grey-bearded men, urban and rural. One of them had a pleasant smile which crinkled the corners of his eyes.

After the <sup>acquired</sup> <sup>with</sup> <sup>his</sup> pipe had been handed round, the Hadramauti took from his belt a bundle of fresh green kat and offered the leaves to his guests. A murmur of appreciation lifted up to us. "This is indeed generosity from Allah."

While the merchants chewed the plant which gives a sense of ease and well-being prior to a period of intense mental and physical stimulation, muffled figures were led into the court. I remember leaning forward with my head pressed against the plasterwork, so that I could see what was happening below, for the slave girls who had giggled and protested when shown how to put on the veil were hooded in thickish black stuff as if they'd been falcons. Their features were lost. All that could be seen of their faces was a flat disc among the folds of the sheiba, the cloak-like or cotton garment which, under different names,



covers the women of Islam from head to heel. By means of a halter which held the sheiba closely round the girl's throat, a man whom I supposed to be a eunuch, guided his charges to a bench where they sat in a row, half stifled under their wrappings and quite helpless, for they couldn't have seen much through the hoods. The merchants showed signs of interest. Their conversation with the Hadramauti became intimate. At a sign from the latter, the hairless, yellow individual, dressed as a man, led forward one of the girls. Deftly, he caught her sheiba and flung it backwards over her head and shoulders, so that she stood naked before the prospective buyers, but with her face hidden. He repeated the process with the others.

The slaves stood as if they were stupefied, their ar hanging, their stomachs a trifle protruding. But they wer straight-limbed with small bones and breasts shaped "fruit.

One girl hung back, throwing her weight on the halte as if she were a young colt. The eunuch had to drag her into the middle of the court, and when her coverings were thrown back, I saw she had her hands tied behind her.

Beside me on the balcony, Zahara, sister of my host, a beauty with the pale, oval face, heavy and smooth-skinned, the slightly hanging full-lipped mouth, the elongated eyes and swollen lids beloved of Persian painters, murmured: "That is more of a dog than a woman! I should not like to have her at my feet." (It is customary for personal to sleep at the feet of their mistresses on the long benches which surround the harem rooms and serve as beds at night.)

I whispered a suitable reply, but I thought of the girl as she might have been, her skin gleaming with oil, a leather skirt round her waist, teeth of wild beasts as a necklace, free and strong on the sandhills of Western Abyssinia. I imagined her with hands cupped to her mouth, uttering the cry of warning which would arm the men of her tribe and bring them into the bush.

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From the roof of a mosque, the Azzan rang out unheeded. Dervishes wandered about the market asking alms in the name of the dead saint, Ahmed el Ouan, who gave them a charm which prevents the blood running from the wounds they inflict upon themselves with axes and iron maces. The cries of the sweet-sellers came from a neighbouring street. Somebody with uncertain fingers played upon an audh. Women, thickly veiled, with striped red and black silks under their indigo sheibas, shuffled on sandled feet, each toe in a sheath of silver. Rows of tall water-pipes, with multi-coloured tubes, stood in the straw shelters, where the servants of great houses watch their master's doors. Jews, with ringlets hanging from their skull-caps, bare-legged, 'd only in print night-shirts, slunk quietly about their siness. In my mind, I could see the whole life of the which went on in the twentieth century as it had one since the days of the Prophet. And in the court low me, a girl who cared enough about her freedom struggle for it, was being sold for a sum representing 7-three pounds.

In spite of Aysha's warning, I leaned so hard against the uttice that some plaster crumbled and the dust fell into my eyes. "She isn't even black," I said indignantly. "ok!"

ne beauty rolled her eyes, rendered liquid by the irrita- of kohol, towards the slender figure quivering at the of a halter. One of the merchants had risen and was 5 a mark above the girl's knee. Zahara shrugged 1ders "smooth as butter." "She is foolish to fight st her fate, but when she has been tied up long gh, she will submit."

I looked at the speaker, and some of the discomfort I felt must have found its way into my eyes, for she added: "A woman has no fate, except that which a man writes for her."

Below us, the hooded figures were being led away. They wei at quietly, stumbling a little in their unaccustomed pppings.

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

As a sign that the bargain had been satisfactorily concluded, the Hadramauti presented to each of his guests, a scrap of soft, black amber, which is a talisman against the evil eye.

Before the Italian occupation of Kufra, the Senussi citadel, so long a secret of the Libyan desert, I bought camel-drivers in the open market. Some of the Bedouins who had done the long journey from the Mediterranean, five hundred miles across uncharted sands, showed no inclination to attempt the route to Egypt via Jaghabub, which included a twelve days' waterless stretch. The Ekhwan<sup>1</sup> advised me to buy slaves to take their places.

Kufra is a valley deeply sunk and surrounded by cliffs. I remember we rode down to Jof, the market town, very early, before it was light. Our tall trotting camels, blue-eyed, of the Thibesti breed, slipped between the palm trees and their pace did not alter when we came to the rough ground by the lake. Ghostlike, we padded across the whiteness of salt and sand.

When the sun rose, we were breakfasting on sour junk and dates, on reddish millet bread, marag which is an oily soup strewn with lumps of fat, figs, and water strangely scented, to hide its brackish taste.

An hour later we sat upon a carpet beside a mud wall. In front of us stretched the market-place. A few reed huts, belonging to Tebu serfs and camel-herds, sprawled across it. The blind-walled houses of Senussi merchants and officials closed the horizon.

Thereafter, a portly personage in a clean white robe chaffered over the price of men whose one desire apparently was to be sold. In fact, the human wares balancing on their heels, thrust their arms under my nose and begged me to feel their muscles. Even in the cool of the early morning the stench arising from their greased skins was animal in quality. In loud voices they boasted of their strength. One man, shrivelled as a gourd, with flesh scarcely less hard, insisted that he'd walked for six days without water.

<sup>1</sup> Brothers of the Senussi religious sect.

carried a rifle the whole way. Another announced, with a smile that split the leather of his face from ear to ear, that lashes had no effect on him. Thrusting a piece of rope into my hands, he begged me to try.

The owner of the merchandise, a Sayed<sup>1</sup> with a reputation for holiness and the powers derived from a knowledge of the Hundred Names of God, explained: "They do not consider themselves men until they've been beaten. Their women will not look at them unless they can show scars to prove their fortitude."

I bought two drivers for sixteen and seventeen pounds apiece.

Later, in a whitewashed room furnished with chests containing the family clothes, the walls hung with texts from the Koran, women slaves were offered to me for approximately double that price. A hag who might perhaps have been thirty, "an excellent cook, very well trained," would cost me as many pounds. A girl, softly curved, sinuous and engaging as a cat, with a blackberry of a mouth and sloes for eyes, would fetch considerably more, but then she was already with child. No wonder that I left Jof with the feeling of being in the "upside-down-country," by which term the Libyan Bedouins refer to the dawn mirage that hangs a two-days' distant landscape just above the horizon.

It happened that I did not take my slaves out of Kufra. The usual hostility which the Senussi display towards strangers flared into fanaticism when somebody started the rumour: "They are not Moslems—they are not even of the sons of Adam?" The Bedouins decided to accompany us, rather than risk losing tongues and eyes in a religious brawl. So I offered to free the drivers I had bought.

They looked at me, aghast. What would they do if they were free? How would they live? Who would feed them?

In the end, I presented them to the bailiff looking after Sayed Riddha's household, and they were delighted because,

<sup>1</sup> "Sayed" is a religious title.

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as chattels of a Senussi prince, they would be able to lord it over all but the Brethren of the order.

The same difficulty exists whenever slaves are freed. When I travelled through Northern Abyssinia a few years ago, bands of armed brigands ranged the mountains, mercilessly preying upon the caravans bound for Lasta and Simyen. Sometimes they numbered a hundred rifles and only a disciplined force could stand against them. Every man of them had been a slave. Freed at the death of his master, with no possession but the rifle which he promptly stole, he had to choose between starving and joining the nearest robbers. For there is no paid labour in Ethiopia.

Throughout Arabia and Africa, apart from the craftsmen and artisans and the coastal porters who are beasts of burden, there is no demand for workers. The poorer families till their own ground, look after their animals and make whatever they need for their huts and tents. Rich men are surrounded by a host of slaves, bred in the house and connected with it for generations, so that they are scarcely distinguished from the innumerable relations of their master.

A woman is freed when she bears her owner a son. A man may win his liberty as a messenger bringing good news, or whenever good fortune, in the shape of a marriage, a successful deal, a pilgrimage, a tribal alliance, the satisfactory issue of a lawsuit, recovery from illness, or the raising of a curse induces in his master a desire to do what "is pleasing in the sight of Allah." But both man and woman consider it their right to stay on in the house of their former owner. They wear his clothes, eat his food and look to him for favours consistent with his wealth.

In Abyssinia where the Emperor, encouraged by the League of Nations, is attempting to enforce the recent edicts freeing all slaves upon the deaths of their masters, brigandage is becoming as much a menace as in China. Robbery is the only pursuit of the landless. And it is carried to extremes when hordes of uneducated serfs, who have been taught to

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brawl and boast and swagger in the retinue of their masters, find themselves without any other means of existence. Accustomed to letting off as many cartridges as possible and to purging themselves sick after gorging on raw meat, their one idea is to force from others that which is no longer given to them in full measure in return for the easiest possible services. So they plunder and kill on the mountain routes, and are shot like wild beasts when a governor decides to clean up his district.

The women suffer a worse fate. Abyssinia is a Christian country. Monogamy, however, is relieved of its rigour by domestic slavery, but when twenty or fifty women of uncertain age are freed by the death of the man who has kept them since they were children, his heir is certainly not going to pay wages for the privilege of feeding toothless mouths. Out they go into the streets, where they must beg, starve, or sell what remains of their bodies. And prostitution in the East bears the same relation to slavery, as the leper does to the stalwart camel-driver.

I remember walking through the sandy lanes of Hodeidah, a port on the Red Sea which, at that time, boasted a solitary Indian consul representing Britain. Beside me shuffled a talkative slave from the household with whom I lodged, while waiting for the monthly steamer. We both wore the Yemenese dress, which meant that we were completely hidden in the folds of voluminous sheibas, and our feet, if I remember rightly, were thrust into crinkled yellow boots, gift of a bride from the Hedjaz. We were talking of a fortune-teller whom I wished to see. "That is not difficult," said the slave, "for she shows her face to every man in the street of——"

Spurred to mischief I suggested we should pass that way, and if the seer were alone, invite her to come to the house so that we might know our future.

The woman beside me was young and not unintelligent, but if I had asked her to pick up an armful of dung and carry it through the streets pressed to her silk-covered bosom, she could not have been more shocked. "Allah

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save us!" she exclaimed. "The sun has made you mad."

She hurried me back to the house, pausing only to give a few leaves of kat to a beggar who whined for such relief, and to invoke the pity of Allah on a leper into whose stump she dropped a few coins.

## WOMEN OF THE REVOLUTION

### *Russia*

ALONG the quays of the Neva, beside the palaces which are now institutes, I walked with a fair-haired student and talked about the revolution.

On the opposite bank a pale sun gilded the spire of Peter and Paul, the Czarist prison, where an earnest young woman who had given the signal for the assassination of Alexander had been condemned to a lifetime of solitary confinement.

It happened that I glanced up at an eighteenth-century façade. On the fourth floor a peasant with a red handkerchief bound over her head was standing precariously upon a sill. "So you have women window-cleaners in Lenin-grad?" I said.

"Why not? Don't you believe in equality?"

My companion was faintly mocking. She evidently regarded me as a barbarian, startled by the complex evidences of civilisation; but she was only too ready to explain. In revolutionary Russia, that embryo of the Workers' State which had existed in subterranean fashion beneath the autocracy of classes now satisfactorily "liquidated," men and women had worked together under the same banner, "The Land for the People, the Factories for the Workers, the Power for the Soviets." They had taken the same risks. Together, they had been banished to Siberia or ranged against a wall and shot.

"We are their spiritual descendants," said the girl, tossing back her short straight hair. "We're just carrying on their job, men and women together. We haven't time



to bother about sex ; we haven't time for much except work and keeping abreast of the Plan, but that isn't going to last. Soon, we hope, two or three hours' labour a day will be sufficient to give us all we need."

I glanced at the speaker. She was pale from undernourishment and a winter behind sealed windows. Her coat was thick, but shabby ; her shoes lamentable. There were lines of strain under her eyes, but she was intensely purposeful. The whole of her body expressed her conviction that life, difficult though it might be and shorn of youth's normal prerogatives, was infinitely worth while.

Her bare, reddened hands clenched under the ill-fitting sleeves as she exclaimed : " Don't you realise what's happening in Russia ? We're making something permanent and stable, while all the rest of the world is at cross-purposes."

I said : " But how long can you go on at this terrific pressure ? Don't you want comfort, amusement, freedom ?"

She replied : " We're not so keen as you are on individual freedom. We've got a dictatorship. We know it and we don't mind, because the State does really belong to us—even the man who runs it gets no bigger salary than a dozen engineers I know." She must have seen my surprise, for she continued : " There's nothing left for us to envy, because we're all equal. My people are peasants. I'd never have had a chance beyond the pig-sty, if it hadn't been for the Soviet. Now I'm educated and I'm studying to be a lawyer." She spoke with pride and, like everyone else in Russia, she went on talking—impetuously, largely, the words falling over each other. She was married, but she wasn't going to have any children yet, because she didn't know if she was going to stay with her present husband. He was lazy. She thought she'd probably register a divorce as soon as she could make arrangements about another room ; but all through the torrent of her conversation, I gathered that her personal affairs ranked second to the Revolution.

" Do you ever talk about anything else ? " I asked at

last, after hearing this clear-eyed firebrand acknowledge most of the defects in the new social system—nobody got quite enough to eat ; transport was sadly lacking, so that many workers had to waste an hour morning and evening getting to and from their factories ; the supply of clothes and household goods purchasable in the co-operative shops was altogether inadequate, and prices in the free market were frankly impossible, but these conditions were temporary, they would be remedied.

My companion laughed. " You don't understand us at all," she said. " Why, my sister's just got married and she's madly in love, but last night she and her husband forgot to go to bed at all. They were discussing the Second Five Years' Plan."

She looked at me with expectant malice. " You don't believe that, do you ? "

It seemed a good moment to discuss sex. " How important are your marriages and have you any family life at all ? " I asked.

" I expect it's not very different from any other country, except that we never make love in public. You won't see young people kissing in the parks. We leave that to Europe and America."

" But you have so little privacy."

" Perhaps, for that reason, we have so little love." The girl frowned. " We take it more naturally than you do. If we can get a room, we marry. It only means signing a book at Zags (the marriage and divorce bureau) on the way to work."

" And if you can't get a room ? "

" Most of us wait. There isn't much opportunity to do otherwise," she added. " Of course, the peasants always marry. They wouldn't be respectable otherwise."

" And you ? "

" We're too busy to bother about respectability. What a fuss you make about marriage, anyway. We think it's convenient, if we want to have children ; but otherwise, what can it matter ? "

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There is no illegitimacy in Russia. Parents, whether married or unmarried, are equally responsible for the support of their children up to the age of eighteen. If a woman doesn't want a child, she can have an abortion, free of charge if she is very poor, at one of the Government hospitals. I once met a girl of twenty-five who looked ten years older and she told me she'd had twelve abortions since she was sixteen. But hers was a most unusual case, for the practice is not encouraged by the wise and competent doctors attached to maternity clinics.

"All Russians love children—it's our most sentimental characteristic," said the companion of my Leningrad walk. "Without even one child, a home is like a winter night without a lantern."

At that moment, having left the quays and the frosty glitter of the Neva, we passed a church. It was closed and shuttered. Plaster peeled from the walls. On the steps crouched a woman in a tattered coat. She held a baby swaddled on a pillow. When I pushed a coin into her hand, she stared at me blankly without movement.

"We don't approve of charity," said the student.

"Well then, what happens to the people who can't, or won't, fit into your system?"

The girl shrugged thin shoulders and answered with honesty and impatience. "There's no place for anyone who won't adapt. We've got too much to do to bother about misfits."

Behind the church was a building which had once been a convent. "What's happened to the nuns?" I asked.

"Some of them are working," said the girl vaguely. "The others have been 'liquidated.'" Extraordinary word, with its implications of exile, expropriation, failure—but the subject did not interest the young woman of the present day, for whom the past had no meaning.

It was in Leningrad that I met the woman whom I will call Chuprova. She was a shock-worker, which means that an additional twenty per cent. of energy, vitality, efficiency and executive power were demanded of her in return for a



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little better food when it happened to be available. There are thousands of these voluntary shock-workers in the factories, clubs, prisons, communal kitchens and bakeries, clinics, hospitals, schools and social services of the new Russia. They can generally be recognised by their air of vigilance. They give the impression of being always on the look-out to see if they can find anything more to do.

Chuprova was an excellent example. She talked gaily, briskly, sweeping her stiff, black hair out of her eyes, smiling all over her harsh-skinned, unusually ruddy face. We were tea-drinking in a workers' club. Behind us flared a great scarlet poster representing a bare-headed mason shouting triumphantly to his fellows: "There is nothing too hard for us to achieve! See—the Dnieper dam is built!" Beyond us were young men and girls with technical books propped against empty glasses. Some of them were talking earnestly—the Plan as it affected their factories, the revolutionary celebrations, Capitalism, Lenin, Marx, the need of being prepared for a defensive war. It was all very serious and also extremely noisy, for out of a loud-speaker poured a lecture on the development of the sugar-beet industry, and in the next room a singing class was giving full vent to the Song of Communist Youth.

"Don't you get tired of this persistent noise and of never, never being, for one instant, alone?" I asked.

The vigorous, middle-aged woman was obviously surprised. "No, I don't think so," she said. "We Russians are very gregarious. We like people and we like to hear ourselves and everybody else talking. As for the radio, I'm so used to it, I can't go to sleep unless it's turned on."

However, she obligingly took us to her flat which was at the top of a gaunt, unfinished building with, as yet, neither heating nor water. Three rooms were shared by seven people, father, mother, a married son and his wife, the daughter (Chuprova), an aunt and her son; and with the exception of the parents, all these contributed to the subsequent conversation, which continued till 3 a.m., relieved by glasses of weak tea and Russian cigarettes. Neighbours

dropped in at intervals and established themselves on the table, the two sparsely covered beds and the floor. Everybody asked questions. "How many unemployed have you in England, in America? Is your news censored? What are you doing about the slums? Are you building new factories?" And always, repeated again and again: "What do you think of Russia?"

We began with small matters, clothes, food.

"Well, really, you know, clothes don't much matter to us," said Chuprova. "We've more important things to think about. As to food, I suppose, strictly speaking, I've been rather hungry for fifteen years, so I'm used to it. No doubt when farming is better organised we'll get more food, but the peasants are stubborn. They want to make money for themselves. They're not yet sufficiently educated to fulfil their part in the Plan." Here I was conscious of the hostility against the peasant which is noticeable in the towns. To the factory worker, absorbed in his or her job, surrounded by propaganda, whose intensity is only equalled by its single-minded revolutionary purpose, the peasant is an obdurate enemy who will *not* produce the food so desperately needed in industrial centres.

"What about religion?" I asked at some period of the evening. There was an ikon in one corner of the room and a picture of Stalin in another. A stuffed stoat looked down from the top of a grandfather clock. All these objects belonged to the old parents, as did the beaded tablecloth, the gaily coloured china and the potted plants.

Chuprova was an Atheist. She said: "Anybody who likes can go to church, but at the club we organise every possible counter-attraction. For instance, we have a splendid anti-religious Christmas concert, which helps to keep people away from the services."

"What permanent good are you going to give the mass of ordinary people in exchange for their Faith?" I asked.

Chuprova replied: "The Russians are a soft race. They've never been able to stand up to anything. Communism is putting something hard and strong into their characters, so

that they'll be able to compete with the rest of the world. Religion gave them patience to go on being oppressed. We're giving them self-respect and courage, so that nobody will be able to keep them down."

I considered the answer while the talk soared like gaily coloured balloons. It was punctuated by laughter, for the Russian is happiest when he is in full spate of speech.

"Surely there is as much terror under the Soviet as under the Czars? The G.P.U. (Ogpu, or Secret Police) is as formidable as the old Cheka." I expected a pause. One is always told that nobody in Russia will talk of the Secret Police. But a dozen answers leaped at me. "So long as the class struggle continues, the G.P.U. are necessary——" "There is still undoubtedly a good deal of wrecking——" but the best reply came from Chuprova. She grinned like a boy and said: "If you possess a particularly savage dog, the more people it bites, the prouder you are so long as it doesn't bite *you*!"

In quest of a lawyer, to whom I had an introduction, I wandered into a District Court in Moscow. Behind a table with a shabby red cloth, sat a woman judge. She wore a dark working suit, threadbare at the seams. Her rough, strong hair was so dark that it accentuated the bloodless pallor of her skin. On either side of her sat an assistant judge, selected from a panel and appointed for no more than six or seven days in the year. One of these was a factory foreman, the other a baker. At the end of the table a grizzled and untidy woman scribbled notes of the case in longhand. There was no sign of a policeman. The accused stood in front of the judges and explained that she had stolen food tickets and sold them for twenty and twenty-five roubles apiece, because she had no work. From one of the benches a witness interrupted. It was entirely informal, but one felt confident that justice would be done. There were no advocates to confuse the issue. The object of every person in the Court, exclusive perhaps of the prisoner, was to get at the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The judge was patient and thorough. She inspired the



proceedings with a feeling of friendliness and the most significant point to an outsider was that as soon as the defendant said she had no work, the interest of everyone present turned from the theft to its cause. Why had she no work? It was unbelievable in Soviet Russia. Work must be found for her at once.

At last the girl acknowledged that she had left the communal kitchen where she was employed, of her own free will, upon which the judges enquired as to her reason for so doing. Was she unhappy? Was she overworked? The case ended with an admission of guilt and a sentence of six months' compulsory labour, which meant that the girl would continue her usual occupation, paying to the State a proportion of her salary. I left the Court feeling that justice had not only been done, but that it had been done with the agreement of the accused.

In a small, frowsty room, I found the lawyer I sought. A large, deep-bosomed woman with straggling grey hair, a competent and patient face, slipping into rolls of fat above her crumpled collar, and a cotton blouse held together with a badge of some workers' association, she was employed by the Soviet of All Trades' Unions to defend its members, as well as students and soldiers. She had seven assistants and she spoke enough English to be able to describe the cases which occupied her attention. She said: "The whole object of Russian justice is to correct, not to punish," upon which I interpolated: "So long as there is no crime against the State."

She agreed, saying: "Espionage, bribery and sabotage are dealt with by the G.P.U., with whose summary courts we have no concern, but in these days of food shortage we have many cases of negligence on the part of managers, or staff, in the State shops, and of stealing tickets. We give heavy sentences for such offences, because we've got to put an end to actions directly deleterious to the general welfare."

She spoke slowly, choosing her words with as much care as if she were interrogating a stupid client. When she wanted a file, she spoke to a loose-lipped, shapeless woman,

wrapped in a black shawl, who munched pieces of sugar with a good deal of noise, in the intervals of acting as messenger. Across the table a girl clerk with a handkerchief tied round a swollen cheek, read the newspaper account of a trial for sabotage in the Caucasus. Leaning over the shoulder of the girl clerk, a soldier commented upon the alternate confessions and denials of the accused. He said : " A friend of mine, a member of the Party, was arrested in Turkey. They asked him why he'd crossed the frontier, and each time they repeated the question they pulled out one of his teeth, but he did not answer it. They did other things to him, but he did not tell. After ten days he died, but still he had not told."

" Comrades," said the lawyer, " will you perhaps not talk so much ? "

But the various conversations continued, and I wondered how any business could be done in such an atmosphere. Eventually we went across to the Frunzensky District Court, where the trial in progress provided sufficient comment on the housing problem in Moscow.

To this day I remember the badly whitewashed room, with a Soviet flag like a great splash of blood above the judges' table. Under the Hammer and Sickle sat a woman with an expression of abundant patience. Her lank hair swept backwards. Her jaw sagged into pouches of flesh. Under brows which had dropped from their original arches, the eyes concentrated on the things in front of them. I noticed the darns patching the dark blouse and the missing buttons at one wrist.

The assistant judges were men. One of them had the sort of face that attracts dogs and children. Broken-toothed, with a mat of black hair, and grime wedged under his nails, he looked about him with interest and understanding. The other might have been a peasant. His skin had the texture and the splayed wrinkles of leather. His eyes held the acquiescence of land workers at the mercy of storm and drought.

The usual woman clerk, giving the impression of a scrap

of refuse salvaged from time, scribbled at one end of the table.

In the centre some clean sheets of paper lay beside an ink-pot. But nobody fidgeted or drew upon the blotter.

Shawled heads of women crowded against the walls. Witnesses in their working clothes sat upon the front benches. The usual smell of unwashed bodies, damp wool and cabbage pervaded the room.

The accused provided the only modern note. In a bright-coloured blouse, neatly collared and cuffed, she stood in front of the table, her head bare and held upright. I could see the badges she wore. They represented the history of her short life. A college graduate, diplomaed for shock-work in her factory, awarded orders of merit by various clubs and cultural societies, she stood there, intent, determined and full of life, her hands clenched, her feet apart. The charge was murder and she didn't deny it.

In voices alternating between stupefaction and scarce-appreciated horror, the witnesses described the finding of her parents' bodies. The slow words dropped as if they were weighted. I could picture the communal lodging-house, its plaster peeling, its walls streaked with damp. I could hear the neighbours knocking at a closed door. In my mind, I saw it flung open, saw the girl, bright-haired in her raucous-coloured blouse, stand for a moment defiant on the threshold, then push her way through the crowd. Her determined steps rang down the corridor as the lodgers filtered, shabby and shapeless, a glutinous stream, through the door she'd left open. There must have been a scream.

Wrenching my mind back to the present, I heard the oppressed breathing of the women, so closely packed they could not otherwise register emotion. And I heard the girl say: "I had to do it. I had to have a room for my husband."

So the story came out, pitiful and incredible. For years the girl had been engaged to an artisan working in the Urals. At last he'd been moved to Moscow, but he couldn't get a room. The girl's parents, old and selfish, refused to

let him share their flat, although the daughter's earnings contributed largely to its support. In spite of them, the young couple had registered their marriage, but they'd nowhere to go. For two nights they'd slept on the steps of a warehouse, half frozen. Then the man had protested. It wasn't good enough.

"I knew I'd lose him if I couldn't get a room," repeated the prisoner, and I saw the woman judge's lips compress until they merged with the wrinkles clawing at her cheeks.

An axe, still bloodstained, passed from hand to hand. Without a quiver, the girl acknowledged that she'd used it. "I hit them on the head one after another while they were asleep." She'd done it quite calmly. There'd been no unnecessary blows. "I know I did wrong," she continued in the flat voice of modernity that neither excuses nor explains. "But at the time I couldn't see what else to do."

The judge was patient. Quietly, as if she were carrying on ordinary conversation over a glass of tea, she asked questions, examining every possible circumstance in favour of the accused.

The girl had been a hard worker. Commotion spread among the shawled heads as comrades pushed forward to give evidence of her character. She'd been scrupulous in her attendance at meetings. She'd instituted night classes for peasants employed in the factory, who could neither read nor write. Such testimony became involved with the consequence of the crime. Hot and anxious witnesses spoke at once. No effort had been made to hide, or even delay, the discovery of the murder. The prisoner had pleaded guilty and refused legal aid.

While the judges spoke to her, it was obvious she could think only of her husband. "We had to have some place. I didn't see why *they* [her parents] shouldn't take us in."

She never altered her position. Straight spined, her weight supported on her heels, her face unpainted, her shabby skirt moulded to her thighs, she faced her judges as she faced life. The sentence didn't matter.

Court and prisoner discussed the case. Witnesses offered suggestions. Between them all it was agreed—eight years' confinement which would be reduced by half if the girl behaved herself in the prison factory.

Forty-eight months for a double murder, and patricide at that! I gasped my astonishment.

But it was enough. The comment the girl made proved her vulnerable. "He won't wait for me!" Despair reduced her stature. Her hair, clashing with the colour of her blouse, looked suddenly tawdry. She was twenty-four and beat.

The senior lawyer, who'd brought me to the Court, remarked with some amusement: "How could she expect him to wait four years? He's probably registered his divorce already."

"In England," I said, "that girl would be hanged and there'd be a crowd outside the prison approving the execution."

The lawyer looked at me as if I were a barbarian. "In Russia, we are too civilised to give a death sentence for that sort of crime," she reproved me.

On the landing, the girl who'd just been condemned was talking to some comrades from the factory. Later, she would be told to which prison she must travel, alone, for the Soviet doesn't waste policemen on civil offenders.

"But it was an appalling crime," I protested. "In fact, I can't imagine a worse one."

The lawyer evidently thought poorly of my wits. "It was a stupid affair and not at all worthy of a Bolshevik. For we do not regard passion as more important than any other appetite. When a man kills for food, it is merely that he reverts to being an animal. So with that girl. What need had they to marry without a room? Both were workers with plenty to interest them. Such a case wastes the time of the court."

"It wasted also two lives."

The lawyer shrugged powerful shoulders. The conversation evidently displeased her. "In a bourgeois state it is customary, I suppose, to measure everything by life, but

your values are false," she said. "Life in itself is of no importance. If that girl had used the axe against an official of value to the State, it would have been a different matter." Her voice rumbled in her throat. Impatiently she added: "Who knows, the little fool may have 'former' blood in her? Such a murder was in every respect bourgeois." In no other words could the capable, clear-eyed woman have expressed such a depth of disapproval.

One night I went to a "remembrance" party in a worker's flat. The previous day the woman had told me: "Everything the family earns goes on food and it is never quite enough," but on that particular evening there were cabbage-soup and sausages, dark heavy rolls stuffed with rice and mincemeat, and a drink, whose name I forget, made from fermented bran.

"How did you get so much food?" asked one guest after another.

"Oh, you know, it turns up somehow. We just scratch around," said the woman, whom we'll call Maximovskaya.

"I dare say you stole some of it," said a nephew and there was much laughter.

"The truth is," explained a chemist, in German, "that we've had to 'scratch round' for ten years and we're pretty good at it now."

The flat contained four rooms, for which the rent was seventy roubles a month. It was inhabited by Maximovskaya, cashier in a co-operative store, her husband, a dock labourer, her brother-in-law, who as a factory foreman earned 200 roubles a month, his wife, who worked on a rolling belt in a rubber factory which turned out 80,000 pairs of goloshes a day, and their respective children.

"For years we lived nine in a room, with only thirty-three square metres of space between us," said my hostess.

"Would you like to have a room of your own in which you could be alone whenever you liked?" I asked, and three people answered at once with variations of "What a horrible idea."

I never met a Russian worker of the new régime who

wanted, for one moment, to be alone. If by some miracle he had a room, or half a room, to himself, his one idea was to get out of it as soon as possible and to join some crowded circle where there would be plenty of talk.

Maximovskaya's party was a typical instance. It began with a dozen people discussing comparatively individual subjects. Our hostess, a large woman in a pink blouse drooping over a dark skirt which had seen a lot of wear, told me about the son who had painted, without any tuition, the studies of still-life decorating the walls. They were remarkable, but Maximovskaya regretfully acknowledged "Painting won't get him a food card. He's going to be a road engineer."

The entrance of some uninvited neighbours distracted her attention. They were warmly welcomed. An electric saucepan, its plug substituted for the light bulb, came into use. Somebody produced vodka, and in spite of a poster vividly illustrating the horrors of alcoholism, which hung above a number of other propagandist cartoons representing the growth of Soviet industry and the grotesque decay of capitalism, it was shared among an appreciative crowd. The wireless, of course, emitted the maximum of sound. I rather think on this occasion it was a university professor discoursing on the results obtained by a special month of shock-work. Somebody sang the Marching Song of the Red Army, an irresistible tune, but the real excitement came when a man, who spent his seven-hour working day ministering to a machine which made some portion of a telephone, hurled out the question: "Which is the more important, Russia or the Revolution?"

This is the sort of subject which Soviet workers adore, perhaps because it admits of no final answer. The whole room argued.

"They are identical," said someone.

A youth with wild black hair announced that he would die for either, or both, because the Soviet had raised him from the squalor of a dung-heap to his present ownership of a quarter of a room, two-thirds of a bed, a leather coat which

he shared with another student, thirty roubles a month for food while he was at the University, and the feeling that he was as good as anybody else in the land. But Maximovskaya provided the greatest surprise. Her round, flabby face flamed with enthusiasm. Although she belonged to the "intelligentsia," for she held a clerical post worth only seventy roubles a month, because a clerk is not so important to the State as an artisan or a technician, she felt that every stroke of work she did benefited a business in which no one had a better interest than herself.

"Everything belongs to us," she cried. "That is the meaning of Revolution." Her arms akimbo, she turned and flayed me with questions. What fees did capitalist directions take before the workers got their share? What salaries went to Ministers and bank managers in England? What was included in our Pensions and Insurance scheme? Did married and unmarried mothers get four months' holiday on full pay when a child was born? Then back to the subject of discussion—Russia was important because it was the trial-ground of the new system, but eventually Russia would only be a factor in the trend of evolution. That the Soviet experiment could fail never entered anyone's head. I left at midnight because I was half-deafened, but the hydra-headed discussion continued. "It behoves every Communist to be on the watch for circumstances indicating the imminence of revolution in other countries, so that he may be able to take advantage of them," said a carpenter, adding that no country at present offered the necessary opportunity.

"Are you all so desperately interested in politics?" I asked Maximovskaya at the top of the draughty and not too clean stairs.

"Of course. In what else should the educated interest themselves," she replied, and warned me not to fall over the communal cat which had chosen to have kittens in an inconvenient place.

Of course, there are men and women left in Russia for whom life under the present régime is "unbearable." This was the adjective applied to it by a girl of perhaps twenty-



eight who visited me secretly, afraid of being seen talking to a foreigner. She belonged to a good family which had owned an eight-roomed apartment in one of the fine old Moscow houses. Since the Revolution, four workers' families had been allotted space in the flat. The original owners, a crippled mother, a delicate sister, a brother married to a woman ten years older than himself, a cousin with a couple of children, and my friend, Vera, were only able to keep three rooms. On these the neighbours cast covetous eyes, claiming that two of the women didn't work and that, therefore, they had no right either to lodging, or to the precious passports which allowed them to stay in the capital.

Sitting on my bed, Vera drew a deep breath. "My cousin's just lost her job as a typist. My brother is an announcer in a radio station and, mercifully for us all, I've worked ever since the Revolution—I began by washing dishes in a district kitchen ; I've been a messenger, a street-sweeper, a saleswoman in a co-operative store—now I'm in a film factory—but at any moment, if somebody claims one of our rooms, the police may take away my mother's or my sister's passport—not mine, of course, because as a worker in full employment, I've a right to stay here."

Tall, thin, fine-featured, with sombre brown eyes in a waxen face, the girl stared into a future which must inevitably be barren. Friendless, because the remnants of her own class were far too anxious to be inconspicuous to court attention by frequenting each other's dwellings and the others too occupied with their own State-canalised enthusiasms to have any time for the half-hearted, Vera admitted the value of the Revolution to the masses, while she saw herself and those relations who could not lose their individuality, ground beneath its triumphant progress.

In Leningrad, coming out of a crowded Easter service, I met a middle-aged woman in the uniform of a Soviet officer. She offered to accompany me to the main street. Her heavy khaki greatcoat swung open over knee-boots of

solid leather. Her greying hair was cut short under a peaked felt cap with the earflaps turned up. Her eyes were younger than the rest of her face. They moved rapidly over the thronged figures on the pavement, mostly young men and girls, arm in arm, laughing as they came out of cinemas or clubs, while she told me how she had fought with the Cossacks of death on the Southern Front.

"In nineteen-seventeen we had nothing—neither ammunition, nor food, nor uniform. We fought the enemy with our bare hands and our bare bodies—we fought with stones and used our rifles as clubs until there was nothing left for us to do but starve, or freeze, or rot." Her voice remained even. She spoke of a troop frozen stiff and black in the snow, of men crushed beneath the guns in ice-bound passes, of a choking fog of gas that rent the lungs and paralysed the brain, of fording the Aras River on a raft, with dead bodies instead of sandbags, of eating rotten horse-flesh. The stories contrasted with her still and calm appearance. Only her eyes, flickering from the crowd on the quays to the empty Neva, suggested horizons of horror beyond the ordinary person's conception. "Why in God's name did you do it?" I asked, when she'd described the long lines of men . . . and women . . . no longer human, dropping to pieces from frostbite under the hooves of terrified horses, the living and the dead trampled into the scarlet snow . . . and forgotten.

She looked at me without interest or emotion.

"I had to get to the front," she said. "The whole of my village went. Only the old stayed behind."

"Did you want to fight?" I asked. "Did you *like* fighting?"

"I didn't think about it. I had to do it," she insisted.

There was a pause. Blackened ice blocks drifted past us, jarring against the stanchions. The thaw spoke in the rush of water under the arches, the shock of floes breaking, the creak of timber in a vice. But the woman didn't notice. She said: "Then we had nothing at all. I've seen the wounded drinking their own blood. Now. . . ." Her

voice rang with pride and she seemed to grow taller, as she paused to study a lamp-lit poster. It suggested the endless march of sixteen millions. "Now, we have men and rifles. Never again will six foreign armies trample across Russian soil!"

"Are all these preparations for the purpose of defence, or do you contemplate a neighbourly offensive?" I asked when opportunity offered.

My companion showed as much surprise as every other Russian of whom I asked the same question. "How could we possibly make war on any other country? What should we gain? We have sufficiently vast a territory and it can be made self-supporting. Of course you know well that you have nothing to fear from *us*, but *we* have to be ceaselessly on our guard against the capitalist States."

She expressed the general belief of the New Russians that all the world is against them. I could not make her realise that the countries she looked upon as potential invaders were themselves terrified of a Russian offensive. Regretting that—theoretically—women were not allowed to enlist in the fighting branches of the Red Army, she concluded the discussion on the steps of my hotel with, "But if it comes to an invasion, every man, woman and child will be in the trenches, yes, and every peasant gaping inside that church!"

## A CHINESE BOLSHEVIK

### *Between two Armies in China*

SOUTHERN CHINA was in a state of war. The Consul-General at Canton was, of course, quite right to refuse us passports for the interior, but equally, of course, it didn't stop us going. All it did was to make the first stages of our journey exceedingly uncomfortable, for we were obliged to avoid all obvious ways of travel, and the sight of an official sent us immediately into hiding.

I don't remember what measures we took to reach the station just as a goods train carrying ammunition was about to leave for railhead, in those days, Chui-Chow. But I can see us now, scrambling into the last wagon, in company with a quantity of bare-legged coolies and some soldiers in charge of a prisoner. For ten or eleven hours we sat on the floor while rain dripped through the roof and a pond spread around us.

The coolies ate their evening rice. Smells of oil, unwashed flesh and damp wool conflicted with stronger odours, one of which we traced to some decaying fish. Shadows humped themselves in the corners. A boy twanged an instrument with a single string, and a corporal politely offered us green tea. But while we were drinking it, a terrific commotion arose. The train crashed to a standstill. Soldiers grasped their rifles and flung themselves at the doors. A Chinese girl shrieked in the most ear-splitting staccato and the coolies huddled behind the boxes of ammunition where, heaped one upon another, they reminded one of white mice.

Prepared for some such occurrence by hair-raising

accounts of brigandage on the line, we expected a hail of shots, and were looking about for a comparatively clean spot on which to flatten ourselves, when the cause of the turmoil became obvious. The prisoner had escaped.

After a prolonged search he was recaptured, unhurt, and the train proceeded. At Chui-Chow, from which we proposed to travel something like 1,400 miles by river junk and sedan-chair to Hankow, for the pleasure of seeing the country "undressed," as it always is in war-time, we spent a couple of days in a Chinese house.

Soldiers crowded the town. They camped in the temples, overflowing into the narrow streets and even on to the city wall which commanded the river. Wounded straggled in with tales of defeat. The magistrate retorted by conscripting every able-bodied male and drilling his reluctant troops whenever they threatened to desert. Blue-bloused peasant women carried ammunition. Maxim guns were trained across the water, but the hills dominating the town were left unguarded. When we pointed out the deficiency and suggested it should be remedied, the magistrate gaped at us: "I don't want the army to be hurt."

After forty-eight hours of bargaining in the court of the Chinese house, relieved by short periods of sleep on opium-couches harder than any floor, we found ourselves possessed of a Cantonese cook and a Hunanese interpreter who had the greatest difficulty in understanding each other's dialect. The troops had commandeered every boat they could lay hands on, but a few were still hidden beyond their reach. So, with silver dollars carelessly clinking through our fingers, we induced the owner of a long, low salt-boat to attempt the journey up-river.

How well I remember that fantastic night. We crept through the streets like conspirators, avoiding the brilliantly lit gambling-houses, where soldiers played fan-tan. I believe we actually had a dark lantern. By its light we picked our way along the wall, stepping over sleepers, avoiding the remains of the executed, until we found the boat moored in a creek. In darkness we paddled out of reach of the guard's

rifles and nosed our way towards the spot where the crew awaited us.

The next three days still seem to me unreal. They passed to the accompaniment of prodigious noise, for there is a strong current on the North River, and the coolies found it necessary to yell themselves hoarse while they poled us over the constant rapids. I remember waking the first morning in the tunnel made by the low-curved roof. Joss-sticks burned before a painted shrine. A screen of plaited reeds shut off the front of the boat and from beyond it came such shrieks and groans that I thought we must at the very least be sinking. Crawling cautiously on hands and knees along the foot-board, I reached the prow and found the junk held by a violent current surging over rocks and a mob of coolies straining on the poles. There must have been at least three times the number I'd hired, but it was no moment for questions. The junk kicked like a colt, swinging from side to side. The crew gurgled and gasped as they flung themselves on the bamboos. An ominous crack came from one of the poles, but, inch by inch, we crept up-stream.

With that particular rapid behind us and a turmoil of water ahead, I asked if it was necessary to make so much noise. The interpreter looked surprised. "If they not let out their breath," he said, "how they not burst?"

"There are a great many of them to burst," I returned severely.

The interpreter gazed at the heavens. Evidently he found inspiration. "They welly poor people, must go back to villages. No boats at all, so they work for high and noble lady until they find their countlee. See?"

"Do they also eat the high and noble lady's rice?" I asked.

The interpreter, who looked like a penguin, for his tight-fitting white trousers were tied round the ankles and his coat of black silk divided into tails, murmured: "They not hungly, eat welly little."

So every day a few ragged figures dropped off into mid-river and waded to their homes. While every morning, it

seemed to me, new bundles of rags, with unkempt heads protruding, littered the well of the junk. We must have been a boon to the country folk, but at Lok Cheung we were obliged to change into a smaller boat. While our few possessions were being moved, I sat on a bench in a tea-house and talked to the owner. Pagodas towered above the river. Deliciously carved belfries leaned over it. House-boats, with a row of fishing cormorants perched upon the side, drifted near the banks. "What do you think of the war?" I asked my host, when he brought bowls of tea, pale and unsweetened.

"It is the Communists," he said firmly. The interpreter nodded. He had come originally from a big city and was familiar with politics.

The keeper of the tea-house continued to talk. His face could not have been milder, but he knew his possessions endangered. So he cursed the strangers who came from the far west across the desert and the mountains whose names nobody knew. He thought of them as demons, or evil gods, who mocked men by making them mad. He told us of a boy who had met one of these inhuman beings in a shrine on the way back from his work in the fields. The lad had been modest and simple, unable to read. But, within a few months, he had run away to the town, leaving his old mother—as great a sin as murder and infinitely worse than robbery. When next seen, he had been addressing a crowd at a street corner.

The man shook his head and dug his hands into his sleeves. The Communists were more dangerous than wild beasts. They wanted to steal land. His eyes grew wide. By what magic they could achieve their object, he didn't know; but he was appalled at the very idea of land being rolled up like a bale of silk and taken away.

After leaving Lok Cheung the river narrowed until it became a brawling mountain stream, with dangerous rapids which we had the greatest difficulty in negotiating. Sometimes we had a dozen coolies on the tow ropes and as many punting. Yet again and again we were only just saved from

destruction on a projecting rock. We passed two wrecks. In one case the junk had been reduced to matchwood and the crew, disconsolate, were drying themselves on the bank. As the river narrowed, great cliffs towered above us, and towards nightfall bullets whistled over our heads. We never saw our assailants, or knew if the shots were intended for us, but, inevitably, when the light failed, the cliffs became a worse danger than the rapids. I remember we spent a whole day contriving a Union Jack out of clothing we couldn't spare, but as we failed to agree over the position of the stripes, I thought it looked remarkably like the battle flag of the Southern army. However, we flew it at mast-head, and it was shot down that night.

Deprived of its comfort, we pulled up the floor-boards and sought refuge below them, for the Chinese always shoots from his hip so you can count on the bullets flying high. Eventually, with one casualty, a coolie wounded in the shoulder, we reached Ping-Shek. There we spent one of the worst nights I've ever known. The only food for sale consisted of live rats, hanging from hooks stuck through the skins of their backs. Torrents of rain made streams of the evil-smelling lanes. We found lodging in a loft, filled apparently with manure. Through the gaps between the floor-boards crept an acrid smoke which made our eyes water and our noses run. Below us, a dozen half-starved coolies quarrelled over their rice. Their voices rose until a fight became inevitable. One of them was knifed. His body sprawled across the foot of the ladder. When we moved it in the morning, it slumped like a doll stuffed with sawdust. The mouth and eye-sockets were holes in the stiffly stretched yellow skin.

It was still raining, but after a couple of hours, wasted in bargaining and weighing loads, we started across country in sedan-chairs carried shoulder high by a ferocious lot of coolies who dropped us as roughly as possible whenever they were tired or cross, flatly refusing to proceed another step until we gave them more money.

For several days we progressed in such fashion through



a region of desolate hills, with an occasional stone-built village. The houses were always shuttered. Strips of scarlet paper propitiated the spirits, but these provided the only colour. Grey and gloomy, the whole district had been looted by deserters and the bands of brigands who followed the armies. Not a farm would open its barred doors. Sometimes we were allowed to sleep in a barn, and when we could buy a handful of charcoal we made a fire to dry ourselves and to cook the rice which was strictly rationed.

When we reached Chin-Chow on the Sian river we found a state of panic. The town had been pillaged. First one army, then another, had forced itself upon the unwilling inhabitants. Last of all had come the brigands, and after raping all but the entirely hairless and toothless, they had taken away the few remaining boys, whatever grain the unfortunate country folk had been able to harvest, and the scant silver they had hidden under their floors.

We were carried through deserted streets. The wounded had managed to crawl into the temples. Shutters hung from broken hinges, but nobody looked out at us. In the market, where the stalls had been stripped, a blind man shuffled about, poking at heaps of garbage. Bodies in blood-stained uniforms were decomposing amidst a swarm of flies. A few children with sore eyes had escaped from the houses where their parents hid. Sitting in the dust, they rubbed their lids and stared at us.

A flag hung in front of one of the larger houses, so we went there to ask for news. For a long time nobody responded to our shouts. Then a cripple appeared. His robe was torn across the back and a sore disfigured his neck. He knew nothing. A general had been lodging in the house, but he had gone away suddenly "to look at the battle." Yes, it was very near. Could we not hear the guns?

We asked about transport, for we planned to proceed by way of the Sian River and, avoiding Heng-Sha, at that time disputed by the armies of North and South, push our way gradually towards Hankow.

The cripple looked at us as if we'd taken leave of our

senses. Every boat and every chair, he said, had been seized for the troops. The last magistrate had fled because the Southern General had demanded 30,000 dollars to pay his men. After three days in office, his successor prepared to follow his example, but before doing so, he had added to the general disturbance. The cripple made a gesture towards the decapitated heads heaped in the middle of the square.

"What about lodging?" we asked.

The cripple thought it doubtful if anyone would take us in, and he proved right. Eyes peered at us through slits torn in doors and shutters. Occasionally a voice bolder than the rest urged us to go back, to go anywhere so long as we got out of Chin-Chow, but we had no choice. Our coolies had disappeared. With the terrified Cantonese, already a foreigner, and the penguin-interpreter, we were marooned in a town unaccustomed at the best of times to strangers.

For a while we took refuge in an empty shed with a view across the river. On the opposite bank rose a nine-storied pagoda, and beyond it, the hills on which nothing moved. Yet, towards evening, sounds drifting across the river showed that women were looking for the dead. With a long-drawn wail, "Kii-ii-ri," they sought to frighten away spirits who would take possession of the bodies.

The interpreter put his fingers in his ears. Perhaps he prayed. The cook, purple and livid in patches, looked as if he were going to be sick. By the commotion in my chest, I realised that I could hardly be more frightened. Yet the shadows were still confined to places where they had every right to be, and I knew the origin and the purpose of the cries stealing across the water.

"Well then, let's move," I said, and we fairly ran out of the shed, dragging our possessions after us. The remainder of the evening consisted of rebuffs. Thick as mulberry leaves they came. Had we been lepers, we could not have been regarded with more antipathy by the distraught and invisible inhabitants of Chin-Chow.

At last, on the outskirts of the town, having fallen over broken walls and not a few corpses, we came to a mud heap

that resolved itself into a house. No door existed to defend the interior. We scrambled over some refuse, pushed past a strip of matting, and blundered into a yard streaked with firelight. Encouraged by the interpreter and feeling the cook shivering beside me, I marched through the nearest aperture and found myself in what I took to be a crowded room. Yet, because of the smoke pouring from the hearth, I could only distinguish one figure. It was that of a young girl. She stood in front of the fire, slim and entirely naked. Her flesh had the tints of old parchment except where the light burnished it to metal. A tender shadow lingered between her breasts and in the hollows under her arms. Her hair was cut short like a man's.

In spite of my watering eyes I could see that she scarcely glanced at us. Her figure drooped. She seemed to be on the verge of exhaustion. Yet she picked up the garments she had discarded and examined them one by one. Unconcerned with the smoke and the varied stench, she bent over trousers and wadded coat, searching each seam for lice.

The picture remains in my mind—a slender statue, gilded by the fire, with dusk between the thighs and the arms outstretched, while the shabby garments were turned this way and that. There was a bundle on the floor. At that moment it did not seem momentous. I could not have imagined it would cost so many lives.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the atmosphere, I saw a woman crouched beside the hearth. Her coarse hair was twisted into a bun, transfixed by a pin washed with silver. Her cotton coat hung open, showing breasts on which the mud dried. She fed the fire slowly with dried grass.

A crone with the lower lip hanging from a toothless gum sat on a stool, her head bent, her hands between her knees, and on the floor beside her a child, whose nose ran, scrabbled in the dust. Other shapes stirred among the shadows. I made out the posts of a bed and tied to one of them, a young buffalo, whose eyes were deep pools with flames reflected in them. A pig, yes, certainly a pig, lay on its side in the corner, and surely the mound beside it must be a

donkey? Before I could make sure, there was a commotion under the bed where the fowls sheltered. Feathers flew. The old woman turned with remarkable agility and dragged out a yard or so of yellow skin, scarcely shaped by its bones. "A good watch-dog," she complained in a voice which said also that the end of the world had come and even strangers didn't matter any more.

There must have been some conversation between our interpreter and the housewife intent on her fire, but I don't remember it. Silver changed hands. The Cantonese established himself in a corner and began to cook, having first borrowed a handful of ashes. Tragedy rolled away and discomfort took its place.

Seated on a mat, with smells attacking our nostrils and insects our bodies, we ate out of wooden bowls. We fed the household and the lean dog. Only the girl, encased now in her stiffly padded garments, darned about the seat and elbows, said she had already eaten. I doubted it, for her eyes followed the movements of our hands as we kneaded the rice-balls and thrust them into our mouths.

The Cantonese made green tea. We drank it very weak and gave some to the ancient woman who turned out to be barely forty. She had borne nine sons and an indefinite number of daughters. Every year at the same season she had conceived and given birth. And with the exception of the hour or two during which the pains of labour kept her bent upon a stool, motionless except for the movement of sweat-drenched hands, she had divided her life between work in the fields with hoe and sickle, the preparing and eating of food, and sleep with husband and children under the same quilt on the same bed. Six of her sons had been killed, fighting one against the other, as conscripts in the armies of generals whose names they didn't know. The other three had fled to escape a similar fate.

A daughter's husband had been beheaded for a new sort of crime. It had something to do with stealing land, as if you could move land like an ass or a water-buffalo. Of course, he was innocent.

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

The youngest girl had been buried the previous day. She was half blind. From childhood she had scarcely opened her lids, sealed as they were with sores. So she hadn't been able to hide in the well, or in the hole where they buried the grain. The bandits had done what they liked with her, but within a few hours "the small one had died." They had used a shroud intended for the mother. It was a fine shroud, made of the best red stuff.

While we looked furtively into the corners to see if the perpetrators of these and other horrors took the place of shadows, the girl with the short hair, who had condescended to drink our tea, spoke in a bold voice. She stretched out her legs—an attitude uncommon to Chinese women. I couldn't understand what she said, but it seemed to me she was accusing the mother of nine sons, who looked confused and stupid. The interpreter settled at my elbow. Bunched up, with his knees thrust into his chest, he looked more than ever like a bird. "She is a Communist," he said in a discreet voice, but he was not awed because, in the city of his birth, most criminals and a number of patriots, misguided into speech, are labelled by the same term.

The cook and the housewife who had finished with the fire and was suckling a baby wrapped in a scrap of flowered cotton, expressed the attention which strained their bodies as well as their ears.

The interpreter continued: "She says that the mother has wasted her sons, that she has given them to be killed, in ignorance . . ."

The old woman appeared more bewildered than indignant. Words would not give her back her sons. Perhaps, already, the other three were dead. It was no use to work hard if, at the end, there was nothing to eat. She mouthed a few such remarks through her sagging gums and turned away.

I put a question to the girl in blue rags. She had a small, sullen face and looked about fifteen. Without hesitation she answered whatever I asked. She came from a town, where she had been educated, first at a mission school, then

by some local intellectual who had taught her politics rather than geography. She knew more about India "stifled by English rule" than she did about her own country. She saw China as the prey of conflicting commercial interests, in the thrall of foreigners, her people ignorant and oppressed. "The land is theirs," she said, "and they haven't the courage to take it!"

"If they do," I retorted, "they are beheaded for a crime which none of these peasants understand."

"It is a disgrace," interrupted the woman with the baby, "that a son and a husband should die by the executioner's sword." But her eyes were dry. She couldn't weep any more.

The girl stretched her arms above her head—a lawless gesture that showed her body under the clumsy garments. "Many lives will go . . .", she said with a blaze in her eyes. Her lips were warmly red and childish when she smiled.

The interpreter found difficulty in translating. "She is very educated," he said.

We talked about Russia. It seemed to the girl that "a great light came from the North." Young as she was, she knew that her life would be forfeit long before China accepted the message of the Soviets, but she didn't care. "We are an old people. We have learned patience," she said.

Gravely, she settled herself to rest. The bundle served as a pillow. With an arm curved about it, as if for protection, she slipped into unconsciousness, and I imagined it healing. Only she ought to have been holding a child. The outflung hand was soft, the fingers pointed.

From the bench on which I balanced, with the buffalo slobbering over my feet, and hens stirring under my head, I looked at the girl and scratched, shifted my position, scratched more vigorously and looked again. She was so still, a little idol, ivory and brown now that the fire had died. The bones of her face were too prominent. How long, I wondered, had she been hungry?

Moonlight splashed upon the floor. My skin seemed to burst into flames. I tore at it with angry nails, drawing

blood and glad of it. When I could endure no more, I rushed out into the yard and examined my arms. They were covered with thin, red marks, and swollen into a variety of hummocks. Every particle of skin seemed to be most viciously alive. Had there been any water, I would have plunged into it, headlong. As it was, I tore off my clothes and stood in the wind, praying that it would be cold.

No movement broke the silence of the room behind me. In the morning, the interpreter would delicately remove all alien presences from his trousers, miraculously white. The cook would look surprised if I spoke of bugs. Meanwhile *they* slept. The girl had drawn her bundle against her breast. Expressionless, *she* slept.

Early next morning we left Chin-Chow. Having failed to get a boat and hearing that our cook might be beheaded as a spy, for he came from a rival province, we decided to walk down the river bank until we came to some village where we might be able to find chairs.

After a mile or two, the unfortunate Cantonese could hardly drag his feet. His teeth chattered, and his face turned green, but he would not be parted from a duck which he had contrived to steal. Feeling that he could hardly be blamed, because we'd all seen a number of his countrymen tied to posts waiting for the executioner, I hurried along, deaf to the complaints of the interpreter. He was ill. His belly shook. Pressing a plump hand to it, he addressed his middle as if it had been a child. I wasn't feeling at all well myself, for I had been drinking river water, in which floated anything from a humped cow to the corpses of soldiers and mules, and I found it difficult to be cheerful on a diet of putrid eggs and insufficiently cooked rice.

But our spirits rose at sight of a boat. It was a decrepit affair hidden in a creek. The crew were ancient and toothless. They suited the appearance of the craft and the inadequate poles with which they emphasised their refusal to move. We argued for a long time under a burning sun. Figures in faded blue added themselves to our group, but I was intent on the bargain. Not until a price had been

agreed did I turn to sweep away the onlookers as if they had been mosquitoes.

Foremost among them was the Communist, her bundle slung on her back. She said nothing at all. The others begged for a passage, describing with horrific gestures the fates in store for them if they lingered at Chin-Chow. The girl stood there, mute, with her head a little bent, looking at one foot which was bleeding. A fresh weal ran across her face, but she behaved as if the matter were of no concern.

The interpreter averted his eyes, saying in a casual voice : " They shoot her if she stay. Look her face where man stlike her now. . . . "

" How did it happen ? " I asked.

" At the gate. She gave little book to man. Other man no like it. . . . "

" Oh, of course she must come, " I said wearily. " They must all come, I suppose. "

Overloaded, with the water lapping to the gunwale, we drifted slowly downstream. The crew did as little work as possible. Why exert themselves when we had the current with us ? But they helped to rig up a shelter, for it was an open boat.

Lying under a strip of matting, we watched precipice upon precipice rise out of a gorge. They hid the sun. The river flowed, still and deep, in perpetual shadow. Far above us, temples leaned from the rock out of which they had been hewn. The dragons on the roofs and terraces seemed to be peering at their images in the water, a hundred feet below. Now and then a breeze shook the bells in the pagodas and the echo went dancing down the gorge. Still higher, caverns had been shaped into houses, and these pitted the face of the cliffs. It was a strange country, wild and rugged.

When twilight fell upon the mountains, we lost all sense of reality. The river became an aisle, and we moved between the columns of a temple. The distance held magic and the wind fear. We hadn't the least idea where we were going. Spellbound, we saw the stars reflected, but the junk carried



no light. A shadow, she slipped into the land of ghosts. We could hear them crying in the darkness, "Kii-ii-ri!"

At Wai-ya-Ping, we found the ambulance fleet moored in neat ranks under a sugar-loaf hill. A guard challenged us, but we floated past. Perhaps we were saved from a volley by our amazing flag, to which we had added when imagination reinforced our memory.

That day we landed several times to see if we could buy firewood or eggs, but the villages were deserted except for a few too old to move. These insisted that the fighting was very near, which so terrified the Cantonese that he forgot to feed the duck we were keeping as an iron ration. During the whole of the hot afternoon I remember the girl in ragged blue sat with the two men, forward. They talked earnestly, and at one moment I saw her undo a corner of her bundle, but what she took from it I don't know. The sun was in my eyes and I twisted miserably under the matting, for the sky might have been metal and the water mirrored the glare.

Our voyage came to an end at Yum-Shing where a barrier of boats and rafts closed the river. It was manned with soldiers. They had modern rifles and plenty of ammunition, and nothing would induce them to let us pass. We must see the General, they said, so to the General we went, and found him a pleasant person, a trifle fat, drinking tea in a yard cluttered with wild roses. He received us with the utmost courtesy, but would not hear of our going further, although we drew freely upon our powers of invention, assuring him that we were so used to wars in Europe that we felt lost without the sound of guns. I fancy we left him with the impression of Hyde Park as a battlefield and traffic in Piccadilly impeded by shells. But he contented himself with replying: "You get killed in Europe—no trouble. Perhaps you get shot here—velly much money cost."

Gloomily, we returned to the boat, but dismay took the place of depression when we realised the commotion on board. A crowd consisting of soldiers, beggars, children, and women porters, gathered on the bank. Forcing our

way through them, we scrambled over the rafts until we were within shouting distance. Then we yelled, but nobody took any notice of us. A uniformed figure with a bayonet seemed about to spear the interpreter, who crouched like a dragged bird in the stern. Clothing and the few possessions that remained to us were scattered over the deck. The matting had been pulled down and, amidst the wreckage, the Cantonese, with the duck flapping and quacking in his arms, was being rough-handled by a couple of soldiers. The girl, I noticed, had disappeared. Or was she dead? I looked for a corpse, but, so far as I could see, there wasn't even any blood.

Pitching my screams higher, I prepared to throw myself into the river in order to swim to the junk, upon which the commotion subsided. A dozen hands hauled the boat alongside. We went on board.

"Now, what is all this. . . ." Before I could finish the sentence, the interpreter had flung himself at my feet and was clutching my knees.

"It is those books, welly bad books," he gasped. "We all be shot. We lose our heads. . . ." He waggled his neck to show how loose it was.

"What books?" I demanded, feeling, as I tried to extricate myself from his hold, as if I were struggling with one of those nightmares that prevent movement. It wasn't really necessary to ask, for, spread among my washing materials, were a quantity of leaflets printed in Chinese and illustrated with the most incredible pictures. I seized the nearest, open at a peculiarly revolting scene, and immediately everybody drew away from me. It was as if I held infection in my hands. I couldn't understand a character of the print, but the picture combined the worst of Russia and China.

"What are they?" I asked impatiently. I was just going to add: "Where do they come from?" when I remembered the bundle from which, until now, the girl had never been parted.

"Communist books!" wailed the interpreter. "Tell

soldiers kill officers, coolies kill masters, evellybody kill——”

Before he became entirely incoherent, I dragged him to his feet and shook him. “Be quiet,” I said. “Now tell me what’s happened. Who are these men?”

With a great effort, his chin sunk and his head swaying, the interpreter managed to explain. As soon as we’d left, the friendliest relations had been established with the guards on the bridge. In the hope of receiving a little tobacco, or, perhaps, some opium, a few soldiers had wandered on board. Then the trouble began. A soldier had prodded the bundle and the wrapping paper remained on the end of his bayonet. From the description, I guessed that the cook had been distributing rice spirit. I could imagine hilarity turning into suspicion when the nature of the bundle was revealed. None of the soldiers could read, but the pictures were enough. They reminded me of the Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, where an exhibition of posters and drawings emphasises the contrast between the luxury of the court and the tortures inflicted upon the peasants. “What about the girl?” I asked. “Gone,” replied the interpreter, and he peered at the river as if he expected her to emerge from it.

“Have you told about her?”

The plump little man shook his head. They hadn’t been given much time to speak. The soldiers had done the talking.

At this point an officer arrived and was duly hauled on board. His lack of expression made me feel more helpless than I had yet done in China. He looked at the pamphlets as if they were garbage, flicked them over with his foot and then became interested in the pictures. Perhaps he discovered torments unknown even to the subtle Chinese.

After he had satisfied his curiosity, we were all dragged off to see the Governor, but this time we passed through a yard where a sullen group were roped together by the necks, their hands tied behind them. In the corner stood a triangle, ominously stained. How long we waited, I don’t know. But when, at last, we found ourselves in the presence

## A CHINESE BOLSHEVIK

of the Governor, the affair became even more awkward. We had no passports for the interior. If I pretended ignorance of how that confounded bundle came on board, the crew would probably be tortured. I remembered the triangle.

The General, whose curves seemed to have disappeared with his good humour, asked pertinent questions. I told the truth as far as I dared. We had given passages, I said, to a number of country folk who wanted to regain their homes. We had two or three still on board when we reached Yum Shing.

"Where are they now?" asked the Governor. He was seated in a carrying-chair, from which the brocade peeled. A broken pole protruded from one side. Some officers stood behind him and their numbers increased as the examination proceeded. One of them had been on the bridge when we arrived. He thought he remembered a Chinese woman.

We looked blank.

"If you not tell," said the interpreter, "we all cut to pieces." But neither he, nor the Cantonese, still with the duck in his arms, nor the crew huddled together and looking like melted jelly, spoke of the girl. They were accustomed to oppression and united by their consciousness of it.

The officers talked quickly and in low voices. Questions and answers were repeated. Then we were told we couldn't go back to the boat. A couple of mild-looking individuals, hairless and soft as eunuchs, took hold of the cook. I learned afterwards they were the General's official torturers, famous in several provinces.

The Cantonese, who had been shaking and moaning, much to the discomfort of the bird he carried, flung himself flat, with his forehead on the ground. Incapable of speech, he lay there, while I found myself involved in a foolish struggle with his guards. Each of us clutched some portion of the unfortunate Cantonese and he hung between us, half senseless, so that whichever pulled hardest found a limp body in his possession. I must say nobody interfered with

me, and when I had got a good hold of the cook, I told the interpreter to start again.

He did his best, but the Governor evidently felt he had wasted enough time. He had to think of the battle. It was only then I realised the meaning of the sounds which were growing louder. For days we had heard guns, comfortably distant. Now there was rifle-fire as well.

Not without dignity, the Hunanese explained that the General knew we were all lying. But it would not be difficult to force the truth out of one of the Chinese.

"How?" I asked, still holding the cook.

The interpreter explained. My stomach turned into glue. I felt it hot and sticky inside me.

So the decision had to be made. Well, the girl might have got away by now. I suppose, had I been given to heroism, I might have said the propaganda belonged to me, but the consequences would have been far-reaching. I don't think one has a right to load one's country with one's own indiscretions, and in those days, Communism seemed to me entirely destructive. So, unconsciously shaking the cook whose stupor continued, I began to tell the General about the girl we had picked up at Chin-Chow. Naturally, I expended all my powers of invention on her appearance, and I felt I was doing well, when the Cantonese tore himself from my grip, gulped out a few sentences and collapsed upon his knees. There was a moment of complete silence.

I broke it with a demand to know what the man had said. "He say it his bundle," returned the interpreter. Nobody looked at anyone else. I could feel breaths held and pulses quickening.

"But it isn't true!" I shouted.

This time nobody listened to me. I tried to get hold of the cook's loose blue robe, but a soldier caught me by the shoulders. Even then I might have been able to do something, but the Cantonese wouldn't help. He let himself be dragged away. Limp as a cat, he hung between his guards. His mouth fell open and only the white of his eyes showed between the lids.

After that, a great deal happened in a short time. But at last, deprived of the interpreter and therefore of all contact with the outer world, we were hustled across the prison yard and pushed into a cell with a mat in one corner and bars at the window. It was probably a very superior cell, perhaps even the habitation of a gaoler, and we had it to ourselves.

When the light failed, a soldier brought a lantern. Later, a man who shook about the knees, appeared with a tray. On it were bowls containing green soup with pieces of fin in it, macaroni and snails.

It was the best meal we'd had for weeks, but it did not relieve our misery. Crouched upon the mat, with shadows moving over the rough earthen walls, we talked and dozed in turns. In the morning, we demanded the interpreter by name. The soldiers, who lounged outside, said a great deal, but nothing happened. In fact, nothing happened all day.

Through the window, we saw prisoners brought in, generally tied together in pairs, so that they stumbled as they walked. We watched men cleaning their rifles, eating and gambling. Movement centred round the door leading into the General's court. It was very hot. Gusts of wind lifted the dust and blew it against the walls. With it came the sound of singing. It was rather a good song, wild and keen.

At intervals, the shaking man, who probably kept a cook-shop and was terrified of prisoners, brought us food. A procession of the curious passed in front of the window and stared. Evidently the prison didn't enjoy the privacy usually connected with such institutions. Even children, with embroidered bonnets and flies bedded round their eyes, toddled up to have a look at the foreigners, but when they came too near the soldiers frightened them away, perhaps with a threat to put them inside for us to eat. And throughout that interminable day, I had an impression of a woman's voice. It must have been intermittent, of course, but when I heard the song, carried by a dusty wind, it seemed to me led by a woman.

After a while it annoyed me that anyone could be gay while we were immured, helpless as deaf-mutes, for the only words we knew were "too expensive" and "go on"! In the Gobi desert we had become accustomed to saying "Go on" each arid morning and each dust-choked night. "Too expensive" had carried us safely—and at times profitably—through bazaars from Tientsin to Canton, but neither phrase was likely to be useful in the present circumstances.

Towards evening, an air of purpose manifested itself in the yard. Excitement drifted in with a crowd of townsfolk. Had they looked at our window, we should have expected the worst, but they streamed past, intent on something beyond our vision. We saw an ordinary man with a sword in a scarlet scabbard. The whole thing was horribly ordinary. Peasants with empty market baskets on their shoulders, their blue robes faded by the sun, jostled women in padded coats, sometimes brightly embroidered, with babies in their arms and children clinging to their trousers.

We didn't realise what was going to happen until we saw the prisoners. They were driven across the yard like cattle. Some of them were half naked and others wounded. Incongruous figures in the cottons of the country-side were tethered to hooligans from the gutter and the remnants of other armies, accused, perhaps, of spying. Two or three boys brought up the rear and they were singing a fine, proud song. Then I saw the face of the youngest and it wasn't a boy at all.

The sorry procession hustled past us. We shouted and dragged at the bars, but it was useless. Nobody paid any attention. They were intent on the show.

A figure in an earth-coloured blouse shambled beside what had once been our cook. I thought I recognised one of the crew, but neither man seemed to know what he was doing. With heads bent and shoulders sagging, they dragged themselves along. They looked as if they had been heavily drugged, or as if, with oriental calm, they had already sloughed the feelings of the world they were about to leave.



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I remember blood on my fingers, as I wrenched foolishly at the bars and the earthen sill that held them. I remember a child with a scab on its lip and a charm dangling in the middle of its forehead. It whimpered because it could see nothing, and then it sat down in the dust and stared at us with round eyes. Beyond it, three slender figures in blue, sang, full-throated, to the sky. They lagged behind the rest of the procession. I could see the girl plainly. She wore a man's robe, torn across the front. The weal still flamed on her cheek. She looked intensely alive. I thought I had never seen such vigour and such anger. She put both into her song which the lads followed, their eyes half-closed, as if they concentrated on a goal, blind to the road by which they must reach it.

For a moment, the girl turned in our direction, but I doubt if she saw us. Blood stained her robe and trickled down her forehead. She shook it out of her eyes. Dirty, with matted hair and mud caked on her legs, her wrists swollen under the cord by which she had probably been tied for hours, she still looked free. It must be easy to die if you felt like that, I thought. But all that night I remembered her, naked in front of the fire, so young, so slight, and so intent upon the lice in her ragged garments.

The General received us next day. Through an officer who spoke a few words of English, he urged us to stay in the village "until the war ended." Judging by the sound, we replied the war was now within a few yards of us. The General, I believe, spoke of sniping in outlying farms, while a battery apparently came into action in the next street.

With the greatest difficulty we secured, first the release of our interpreter, and then, when the flight began, a pass permitting us to go back by the way we came. By that time, perhaps, the General was glad to be rid of us. A powerful enemy threatened his rear. The country was swept bare. He had neither money nor provisions.

Late at night we regained the river to find soldiers occupying all the boats, but, for once, the interpreter bestirred himself. By 4 a.m. we were poling up-stream on a raft

manned by an old woman, a toothless priest, and a boy attired in a loin-cloth and one straw sandal. So began our three-hundred-mile retreat.

We left the river at the first village where we could get a guide. Streams of refugees scurried like ants in all directions. Delicately painted girls in coats of pale silk, clutching whatever possessions they had been able to save, peered timorously from sedan-chairs. Portly merchants waded through rain and mud. The wounded were heaped upon small shaggy ponies. Beggars, deserters, scholars and children looted whatever remained in fields or farms, and always it rained as if the skies had burst.

At Ping-Shek only one boatman would face the torrent, and he did so because his wife's greed exceeded his own fears. I can't imagine why we weren't drowned. The rapids had turned into whirlpools. Strawlike, we swept across the river, helpless as any other jetsam, dashed from side to side, flung on again, stern foremost, with torrents pouring over us. Four men clung for dear life to the rudder. The rest hammered feverishly at boards loosened by the strain. It was impossible to stand or sit. I lay in the bottom, clinging to a plank and listening to the timbers cracking and the wild howls of the boatmen.

Ours was the only junk on the river. Startled peasants shouted to us from the banks, but we had no time to reply. Rocks clawed from a tumult of water. Corners leaped at us amid a crash of spray. In the smooth reaches between the rapids, the whole crew crouched upon its knees and prayed. It took us six days and nights to go up that river. We came down in less than twelve hours, and were inside the walls of Chui-Chow before nightfall.

Next morning we left for Canton, and the train which, in those days, used to arrive anywhere between 5 p.m. and midnight, chose that particular occasion for panting into a surprised station exactly on time. So that we were eating hot buttered toast on board a steamer bound for Hong Kong at the precise moment when the police, sent to arrest us by the Consul who had refused us passports for the

interior, arrived upon the platform. I believe they spent the evening searching the hotels at Canton. We peeled off the clothes from which we hadn't been separated since we started on our journey in that first rice-junk, north-bound from Chui-Chow. They reminded us of every stench in China. One by one, we thrust them through the port-holes, but we could not so easily discard our memories. Nor could we fill in the gaps in the story. For we did not know what sudden heroism, or what sense of fatality had inspired the Cantonese to take upon himself the burden of the girl's guilt. We did not know how she left the boat, who betrayed her while she hid in man's clothing, why, or how she was arrested. The interpreter could tell us nothing. "She wild woman. Cook welly blave," he said, but neither adjective fitted the man and girl as we had known them.

## CONFLICT BETWEEN MARX AND MOAB

### *Azerbaijan and Kurdistan*

FROM Tehran to Tabriz the road is comparatively good. The Armenian lorry, laden with bales of cotton, among which I sat, with half a dozen other passengers, several opium-pipes and an animal not unlike a raccoon, rattled along at a good pace.

At Kazvin, it being then Muharram, six hundred fanatics in white robes preceded by dummy corpses, staggered through the streets. Each man carried a sword and at the cry of "Oh martyred one! Oh blessed! Ya Ya, Husayn!" the linked arms flew up, steel bit into bare brows and blood spurted on to robes no longer white.

At Miani, famous for the size and appetite of its bugs, the telegraphist, roused from sleep by an excited crowd, offered me "a very clean room, entirely fit for my occupation." We climbed up to it and found a man sprawled upon the bed, snoring. Unceremoniously, he was dragged from "the very clean room," copiously furnished with spittoons, and his bedding tossed out of the window after him. But every hour or so he returned, with the meekest apologies, to look for his least discreet and, as such, quite indescribable possessions. So I wasn't sorry when, before dawn, the driver shouted, "Oh Lady, important and of great strength, it is so late that we shall grow old on the way to Tabriz," which meant that he wanted to start.

That day, I remember, the lorry stuck in a stream and the passengers spent two hours digging it out. Subsequently, we broke a spring and tied it up with rope. Then

we ran into a dust-storm. Within sixty seconds, the air was black and filled with strange substances. Soon, all that should have been under our wheels was plastered upon our faces. Blinded, choking, we crawled through an atmosphere that had become tangible and articulate. The wind flung itself at us, shrieking and using all sorts of horrible missiles. Through rents in the fog we saw animals and human beings whirled about and heaped incontinently with other rubbish.

In fact, Tabriz did its worst to us and we saw nothing that first evening except a desert of flat roofs, surrounded by frilled red mountains. At that time, the Kulak<sup>1</sup> revolt was in full swing. Daily, refugees from Armenia or the Caucasus attempted to cross the River Aras on rafts made of inflated goatskins. The guns of the Red Army took toll of them, but some contrived to reach the Persian bank, with the result that the gardens of Tabriz became a camp. In tents made of anything that could be begged or borrowed, or hovels contrived from driftwood and empty petrol tins, lived a collection of people as diverse as the animals of the Ark. And they must have had much the same point of view. For, to them, Bolshevism represented the flood and Tabriz a temporary Mt. Ararat.

Seated on a packing-case between a couple of quilts hung from a tree and a mattress walled about with scraps of iron, the interstices stuffed with grass, I listened to the tales of the refugees. There were priests, farmers, students and middlemen, lawyers, merchants, outlaws, a scrap-heap of humanity discarded by a mechanical system. And there was also a girl, whom we will call Anna, although, doubtless, she had other names.

I saw her first, seated on a barrel, her long legs outstretched. She was lean and sunburned to that lovely clear brown one sees on the beaches of a Latin country. I can't remember her hair except that it was cut short and didn't interfere with the shape of her head, but her eyes, under the straightest possible brows, were blue. Such a

<sup>1</sup> Russian farmer.

blue! I /  
could n /  
used to wonder if sea and sky and jewels combined  
duce that blazing, crude clarity. Those eyes in  
and shapely face were as the domes of Isfahan  
in the desert, but they were hard with youth  
the inflexibility of the new Russia. They did not  
but they found a great deal to criticise. Because, for  
Anna, everything in Azerbaijan lacked the essential quality  
of purpose.

That first morning, without moving from the barrel, she asked me, "Why d'you waste time with all these people?" and she didn't wait for an answer. She had so much to say.

In her black blouse and skirt, worn grey at the seams, with rough stockings, not too well mended, her head bared to a ruthless sun, she was the impersonation of force. An exile, presumably, but she had her life in hand. She knew what she intended to do with it. So she could afford to be detached. She had nothing to give the fugitives heaped among the shelters, cooking refuse, babbling about their pasts because they had no futures.

"I've come from Samarkand," she said and I had a vision of the domes and minarets, the blue and yellow tiles, the arches of El Rejistan. In my mind, I saw the white, flat-roofed houses and the perishing mosaics of Shakh Zinde, fortress of the dead. I saw the Usbek women smothered in their curious cloaks which fasten across the mouth,<sup>1</sup> the old men in their turbans and the boys in their fox-fur hats. I watched the laden camels with their eyes half-closed, the groups eating plov in the bazaar, the melon-seller huddled under his cart, the tea-drinkers among the tombs and the court of justice in a mosque, where the nomads, who live in felt huts, stare at posters representing a revolution of factories and machines.

"What were you doing there?" I asked.

"Teaching," replied Anna and out came her story. She was twenty-six and possessed of a boundless enthusiasm. She'd studied everything within reach and raged

<sup>1</sup> The *parandja*.

because she couldn't pass on her knowledge quick who had Her father had been a miller, her mother a seamster? " I she said nothing about her grandparents. I won't the shadow of the deprived classes hung over them, earned

Anna had cut adrift. In fact, she'd made a habit of so. She'd been a shock-worker in a jam factory and organised night classes as an outlet for her energy. She'd taught in a primary school at a time when salaries were fifty-five roubles a month, and left it for the Central Asian republics, where Marx and Moab are at war and the dust of Tamerlane is buried under the regulations of the Soviet. There, she'd imagined a crusade, with a portrait of Lenin instead of the crucifix. She'd envisaged herself tearing the veil from the faces of enraptured women. Instead of which, she'd been set to teach exceedingly stupid workers what they didn't want to learn. "They were tired," said Anna, with the scorn of one who'd never recognised the rights of her body. "They earned little. Everything was difficult. They wanted to go back and live like pigs in their sties. They grumbled at having to work an extra four hours three days a week in order to learn to read."

So the crusade had lost its zest. And most surprising of all, the women preferred to remain veiled. The only one who, succumbing to Anna's powers of persuasion, had removed not only her headgear, but her parandja, fell victim to her husband's knife.

"Well, what did you do then?"

It appeared that she had become a government inspector—the term seemed to me vague—working among the very poor, the wives of prisoners and the discontents on the new railway line.

In fact, I thought to myself, oh most unusual one, who should have faced the flames of the inquisition, or led a forlorn hope against the infidel, you became a secret agent—no more and no less than a spy! But what are you doing here? You have no connection with all this waste material, floated across the Aras to the thunder of Red guns. If you came, lying flat between two goatskins, those admirable



legs of yours submerged, bullets whipping the water, the blood of prosperous farmers pouring into it, you knew well the bullets were not intended for you. Your blood would not be wasted on the legendary Araxes. "Tell me more-

Anna did not hesitate. Perhaps, she hadn't been able to talk for some time. She spoke with passion and common sense about conditions among the primitive peoples of Central Asia. But she saw all those small republics as infested by British agents. She suspected every priest and holy man. She would turn mosques into schools and force women into the seats of judges. And as for the vermin in the pay of capitalist countries, extermination was too good for them. "See you," she said, speaking better German than I did, "there was a family I knew well. The daughter had intelligence. She wanted to learn Russian and to work in a factory. I had great hopes of her, although her mother was a fool, afraid to look out of her own door. For some time, I lodged in their house and would you believe it, I found a talisman, one day, in my shoe!" Unconsciously, she drew a picture of an Eastern household, the father a tailor, working cross-legged in a hutch in the bazaar, devout in his attendance at the mosque, the mother full of talk and cares, both boundlessly hospitable towards their guest, although disturbed by her influence over their daughter, who would have been married, long ago, but for the new ideas. "And then," said Anna, with the manner of one exploding a squib, "I discovered the old man was a Bastmachi! Can you imagine? He played the part of enquiry office for all the counter-revolutionaries of Turkestan? It shows one cannot tell by appearances, for he looked so mild with his shaven head and his spectacles always awry and when it was cold, he carried a brightly painted ball, full of charcoal!" Under the general title of Bastmachi, Anna evidently heaped all who were against the Soviet, nationalists and followers of the ancient Emir of Bokhara, Said Mir Alim Khan, bandits and assassins,

liberated from the old prisons, or White Russians who had been officials under the Tsars. "What did you do?" I asked.

"Reported him, of course. He was tried and condemned to death."

Involuntarily, I drew away. "Whatever crime you had committed, he would not have betrayed you, once you had eaten in his house," I said.

"Betrayed!" exclaimed Anna, surprised, and I realised that, for her, there was only one form of treachery. Her loyalty was to the system. She had none left for the individual.

At some length, she explained to me how little a life or a million lives counted against the evolution of a genuine civilisation. For a moment, she made me feel the struggle between the nomads who had lived by raiding, who took what they chose and held on to it as long as their strength sufficed, and the ordered mechanical forces intent on eliminating the individual in favour of the mass. With eloquence, she described the petty warfare of the hearth. Beside it, the father read the Koran, his fingers in his ears, while the son sat rapt at the foot of a loud-speaker to which his mother had tied blue beads to avert the evil eye. She used large, imposing words, but they did not spoil the picture. "And death, after all, is not important," she said. She spoke as if it were a broom with which one swept up the rubbish, but I felt she would treat her own life as casually as that of the nationalist Bastmachi.

"Why are you here?" I asked. Anna told a tale of disputes with officials and the enmity of the G.P.U.,<sup>1</sup> of a fearful escape by the secret road, known only to the Moslems who, in those days, organised the fugitive traffic across the Aras, but it was only a tale.

"Tabriz is a long way from Turkestan," I protested, because I thought she might have done better.

Anna looked at me with eyes brighter than ever. "Well then, let's go on talking about . . ." she began, but I

<sup>1</sup> The Ogpu, Russian Secret Police.

don't know what subject she was going to suggest, for at that moment, a dreadful noise arose behind us. We turned and were on our feet and moving before we had any idea what to do.

There had already been quarrels among the refugees, crowded together, regardless of nationality, but this was more serious. A youth in black overalls lay on the ground, clutching his throat, from which the blood streamed. A woman, armed with a kitchen knife, had thrown herself at his assailant. She'd succeeded in laying open his cheek from brow to chin before he got his hands round her neck.

"He'll kill her!" I gasped.

"Yes, I expect so," said Anna.

The woman's face darkened. The knife dropped. She made vague tearing gestures with her hands. By this time everyone in the garden had collected to watch the spectacle, or was running towards it, but nobody interfered. When I seized the man's coat in an ineffectual effort to stop murder, a young Armenian said, "She's his wife," as if that explained everything.

A shelter collapsed under the pressure of bodies, half-clothed and emaciated. I tried to get hold of the man's hair, but it was too short. "That's no good . . ." said Anna. "Get out, quick!" She had a pole in her hands and the next instant she'd thrust it between the man's legs. The effect was instantaneous. His grip relaxed. He doubled forward, biting at the ground and squealing. The woman lay where she'd fallen.

I imagine I said something appreciative, for Anna retorted, "It wasn't worth doing, you know, but you were in such a state. . . ."

Coolly, she picked up the pole. It had a sharp point. "Not a bad weapon," she said, "but I wish I hadn't lost my revolver."

It occurred to me later that she must have known her own danger. In that camp, where everyone had suffered to the limit of their capabilities, where escape and the horrors

that led up to it were the sole subjects of conversation, she could not have hoped to pass unnoticed. Her tale must already be threadbare, or her silence suspect. But when at last I ventured to ask her if she had plans, she would say nothing at all. For some days she remained in camp, growing, I thought, thinner and isolated always from the rest. When I last saw her, she had hollows under her cheek-bones. Her eyes burned. "D'you ever sleep?" I asked her.

"Not much."

I thought she mocked me with the unuttered question, "Would you?"

I brought her food and she gave it to the children. One morning I found her bandaging a wrist with a strip of underclothing. She said she'd cut it, falling over some empty tins. I noticed the women, with their backs studiously turned. The men were hidden among the welter of domestic material which, hanging from branches, or supported against trunks, provided some sort of shelter. Nobody spoke to us. "They don't matter," said Anna, gritting her teeth as she pulled the bandage tighter, "but there are some, this side of the river, who do." With this cryptic sentence I had to be content, for, next day, Anna disappeared.

My imagination ran to the dramatic, but the Patriarch explained that it needed the support of a body. Without a "*corpus delicti*," nothing could be done. The Armenians, he assured me, were a peaceful people. They were killed, but, according to him, they did not kill. I retorted that I had far too much respect for his persecuted people to credit them with the attitude of sheep. He was a very fine old man and he permitted himself a smile.

Within forty-eight hours, Soviet troops arrived at Zinzezur. Six hundred cavalry crossed the river on pontoon bridges, penetrating some fifteen miles into Persian territory. Disarming the garrisons of various block-houses, they surrounded the village of Vineh, cut the telegraph wires, searched the cellars of a suspected farm and, capturing the refugees they sought, retired, without casualties.

the old women and flung these human bundles into the lake, but I saw no such atrocities.

We arrived at Ararat one evening. The guns which had provided monotonous accompaniment to our journey, were quiet. An occasional rifle-shot came from the villages, whose stone-built houses faced with mud are plastered upon invisible ledges, or squeezed into fissures that look like shadows. But the Kurds weren't wasting ammunition.

It seemed to me the air stank. Before we began to climb towards the first of the houses we passed an endless succession of dead bodies and some that were not yet dead. The Turks had lost heavily before they retired. Huge, black crows fed greedily upon the corpses. When disturbed, they flapped away with blood dripping from their beaks.

Some of the village women came out to meet us. Stained with earth and smoke, they rejoiced. "We are not afraid of our enemies! We will exterminate the accursed race," they shouted and "When we see them coming, we laugh, for how can an army reach us here?"

Looking up at the rocks and the hamlets, inconspicuous as fungi, I thought that unless the whole mountain were blown up it would be impossible to dislodge its defenders; but the Turks are fine soldiers and they outnumbered the Kurds ten to one.

After a deal of explanation concerning my presence, during which everybody talked a different language and the only one of which I understood no word was the English of a self-appointed interpreter, I found shelter in a house with a hummock to itself. It consisted, so far as I could see, of two rooms, with earth-lined walls, and it looked down upon flat roofs terraced below it. There was little light, so I fell over cooking-pots, children, and a painted chest or two, before settling on a mattress, where an old woman smoked one cigarette after another. A girl with a gash across her arm offered me a glass of colourless liquid. Before I drank, I asked about her wound. A stray bullet, she said. Not a great thing. She'd been fighting

with her brothers and had enjoyed it. Blood-stained, she smiled at me. I took a huge gulp of what I supposed to be water, because I couldn't bear to listen to her while she talked, as a child of Jack the Giant Killer, about Ibrahim Agha Huské Tella, that wild and gallant freebooter, leader of the most daring raids, a ubiquitous and altogether amazing person, capable, apparently, of fighting in three places at the same time. For I knew that she and this hero of the mountain and all the villagers, who fought a modern army backed by aeroplanes and heavy artillery, were doomed to the fate of Riffs and Druses.

Subsequently, the evening became blurred, for the water turned out to be a particularly potent araki.<sup>1</sup> While I still clutched my throat and spluttered, my face on fire and my eyes streaming, figures crowded into the room. I saw them as shapes, swollen by the immensity of sash and turban. Rifles were hung upon the walls. Their triggers formed convenient pegs. A vast crock simmered over a hole filled with charcoal, and on another hearth a man made tea with an exaggerated number of pots. I don't know where the light came from, but it seemed to me the colours were very bright and the women's dresses a multitude of folds.

When my brain cleared, I found myself lying in a corner beside a Kurd, who snored, with his head on a cartridge-belt. Everybody else was equally recumbent. The women had disappeared under bright quilts. I could only see the tops of their heads in a mixture of starlight and the glow from the hearth. But beside the cauldron sat a woman, as motionless as if she'd been carved in wood. I couldn't think of her as stone, for she had too much expression. Her features were long and fine, her eyes heavy-lidded. In her blue-black hair, which hung to the level of her chin, coins and a strip of silk had been wound. From the hollow filled with embers came a glimmer of red. In it, the woman lost her pallor. Life touched her cheek-bones and her lips softened.

<sup>1</sup> Raw alcohol.

For a long time I watched her, but she didn't move. A robe of rich brocaded silk covered her from the base of her throat to her wrists and ankles. Over it, she wore a coat of many colours and a chain hung with amulet cases.

An incongruous figure, I thought, among the warriors and earth-stained village women sleeping with their weapons under their hands. After a while I supposed her to be a figment of my imagination, for no human being could sit so still. No breath stirred the silver on her breast. Her eyelids did not flicker. When a tongue of flame leaped from the pit so that her worn beauty and the splendour of her garments were fully revealed, I wondered, half asleep, if she were a corpse arrayed for burial and—in my last waking moment—whether a corpse could sit upright.

That night I was devoured by every form of bug and roused by an earthquake which resolved itself into a huge Kurd shaking my shoulder and shouting, "The war is at hand."

As I scrambled to my feet, I heard rifle-fire, but it didn't sound very near. Just inside the door, a group of men, mightily turbaned, with trousers like balloons and voluminous sleeves rolled up to the elbows, sat upon the floor, eating bread, chopped onions and "dogh," which is sour goat's milk. Behind them, crouched the woman who had haunted my dreams. Her shoulders drooped. With her chin upon her hands, she stared across the threshold. The stony slopes dropped towards the ravine. Haze covered the distant plain.

"Who is she?" I asked the girl who best understood my mixture of languages.

"The wife of a headman, but he is killed, and her three sons are also killed."

"Why does she wear those clothes?" I whispered, while I searched for bugs—three, no four in the seams of my coat, and innumerable transparent stringy creatures, scarlet after their meal.

"It is a dress of ceremony such as brides wear. She has put it on for her men who died in the battle." The girl



CONFLICT BETWEEN MARX AND MOAB





looked expectant, but because I was tormented by the insects making free of my body, I said feebly "It'll get so dirty."

The girl's expression changed. "She will never wear it again."

For three days I remained on the mountain. I found the Kurds generous and hospitable, with a courage that can only be described as sublime. A few thousand peasants, ignored by civilisation, isolated from their fellows, deprived of munitions and food, fought desperately and hopelessly for a freedom which was theirs long before they raided Xenophon and his retreating ten thousand, and which they had maintained as a right ever since. For the rest, they were grossly ignorant and stupid, a sullen, swaggering race who believe that "grass grows quickly over blood shed in fair fight."

News came from the plains. In Zilan, Shadakh and Forduz the tribes were fighting grimly, but eight hundred families had fled across the Persian frontier to add to the confusion of a province devastated by earthquakes.

The legendary Ibrahim Agha held council with his warriors. They gathered in a mud room, with the straw that is used as mortar sticking through the walls. A platform occupied the further end. Below it huddled what remained of the livestock and chickens, among a miscellany of quilts and painted chests.

On the carpeted portion of the floor, the Nationalists leaned against rolls of bedding, with rifles, embroidered jackets and the ribbed felt waistcoats worn by Turko-Persian Kurds hanging above them. They talked of "stiffening the resistance" of the rebels between Erzeroum and the frontier of Azerbaijan. Weak tea bubbled in the samovar. Pathetically small portions of sheep's cheese and "mast" (a junket made from curdled buffalo milk) with sheets of bread, tasting of sand, were offered on a tray. But the warriors would not eat. They touched the dish and their lips. Their hungry eyes sought the ground, or the faces of their fellows. One of them, a large man whose

flesh hung in folds, shouted "Allah help us! That a belly full should be sweeter than the feel of a woman or a gun!" The others laughed. They made a great noise over their tea-drinking to simulate plenitude after a fast.

A few hours later I rode south with a band of Kurdish terrorists who proposed to raise the spirits of their friends east of Van, by murdering any enemies in the shape of unwary Turkish farmers who chanced across their path. I wanted to slip back across the Persian frontier in the neighbourhood of the Rayat Pass, highway to Iraq, but I didn't much care what happened on the way.

Whatever its purpose, it was an exhilarating ride, or so I thought for the first few hours. Then the Kurdish saddle, high-pommelled back and front, became a vice in which I turned and twisted to relieve a dozen different aches. The coal-shovel stirrups cut my ankles, and the rifle which they made me carry bumped against my hip. But in front of me, unconcerned, with her robes ballooning in the wind, rode the widow of the headman. She belonged, it seemed, to a southern village and would return to it, bereft of her men. But I don't think, really, she'd any intention of returning.

She rode like a madwoman. Her horse squealed as she drove him at a chute of clattering stones, with a hairpin corner at the bottom. Where we drew rein and dismounted to pick our way, cautiously, on foot, she dug her heels into her unwilling animal and plunged downwards in a cloud of dust. Yet at the end of the first day she was alive.

We slept on the floor of a cave with sentinels lying behind boulders, because of a blaze far below us. We mounted in the dark and rode hard, and at the end of the second day the woman lived, although I had not seen her eat or drink.

We were still on the high ground, which is sparsely inhabited. Soobhy Pasha's troops pillaged in the plain. Sometimes we could see traces of their passage, a village in flames, a crop razed. The fugitives who fled from one terror to another received scant mercy from the men of Ararat. At one moment, a head decorated the leader's

bayonet, and he cursed when his horse stumbled and the trophy rolled down the track.

That day one of the Kurds gave me a cloak, brown as the earth, and I wore it over my whipcord. Like the tribesmen, who had chosen dun-coloured horses, indefinite as the light and shade which splattered the hillside, I could move unnoticed, but the widow of the headman blazed the trail, and her robe was a banner, white and gold.

"She is mad!" said the men of Ararat. "So will she bring us fortune, for the mad are blessed of Allah."

I thought she was much more likely to make a target of us, for the spasmodic firing which had accompanied our progress gathered volume. It was still below us, but as the track descended, I expected, at any moment, to see a Turkish outpost.

The Kurds did more. They hoped for one.

About this time I became conscious of another sound. Rushing water—that was it! Somewhere a stream, swollen by the last rains, made a great fuss as it tumbled from rock to rock. And that torrent saved our lives, for it deadened the sound of horses' hoofs.

Led by the woman, at a perilous pace, we flung round a cliff and fell upon an unpleasantly large number of Turks, who were taking their ease. We were on to them and through them, with scarce a dozen shots fired, before they realised what had happened. But the widow's robe showed scarlet and the stain spread from her breast. If it hadn't been for her I think we should have gone on, for the Turks had a Maxim, to which they were already scrambling. But the woman turned her horse. With empty eyes and a face of stone, she went back. I don't think the Turks fired. There was a moment in which every one of us stood still. Then I realised what must happen. With the last of her strength the woman clung to the saddle and the pace of the horse kept her upright. Blind, she rode through the enemy. But as she neared the cliff, a soldier thrust at her in terror. His bayonet ripped the country-bred's shoulder. The animal staggered and plunged towards the side of the ledge, but it

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

was the rider who forced him over. A scream tore through his nostrils, but the woman made no sound.

Her blood-stained robe was the flag for which the Kurds went into battle. And they won, because the Maxim jammed.

The Turks retired. The war cry of Ararat startled the crows more than the shots to which they'd become accustomed. "I told you she would bring us fortune," said the Kurdish leader, mopping a wound in his head with a very dirty turban. His followers were doing their worst to the bodies of the "accursed" dead.

Such was my glimpse of Moab.

## WOMEN OF THE FLAME

### *Dutch Guiana*

To Dutch Guiana I went, because I had heard of the "People of the Flame." Rumour has it that these human salamanders are impervious to the effects of fire, but nobody has yet explained whether it is due to the thickness of their epidermis, or to some spell which enables them to treat a bonfire as a nettle.

Of The Hague, capital city of Holland, Villon wrote : "C'est le plus beau village du monde." The same charm, intimate and decidedly leisured, pervades the colonial towns. So far as comfort is concerned, the Dutch are the best colonists in the world. They have invented porches of really consoling dimensions and the "paheit,"<sup>1</sup> a more active form of consolation. They have invented also the Dutch-wife, compared to which, in hot weather, no woman offers any solace at all.

Paramaribo, capital of Guiana, is satisfactorily situated where the Atlantic and the Surinam river meet. So it is illogical that I should remember, first of all, the reis-tafel which I ate an hour after my arrival.

The hotel stands on stilts and looks as if it might walk away at any moment. The dining-room, at that moment, was but a frame for a mountain of rice, in which lurked every conceivable delicacy. Examination—I had almost written exploration—revealed all and more than had made my mouth water at the feasts of dictators, demagogues, diplomatists and dipsomaniacs.

<sup>1</sup> A drink.

I had three helpings. Afterwards, I waddled on to the verandah and with a benign eye, regarded a great deal of Paramaribo. The Governor's palace impressed me as being handsome, white and definitely domestic. For all Dutch houses suggest well-brought-up children, good cooks and a decent amount of sleep. A peculiar tree stood in the garden. Its paddle-shaped leaves pointed directly north and south. Apparently, they possessed a wind of their own, for when there was none elsewhere, they dipped up and down, faithfully semaphoring the direction of the next storm. At the end of the square, red-brick buildings dozed, with their porches gathered round them. Macaws argued in the tamarinds, and the colours of the flowers screamed as loudly. From an avenue of colossal mahogany trees, so tall that the sky hung through the highest branches, peered a negress bunched about with brilliant cottons. I remember her face. It was so shinily black. It looked like stuff, not skin. I could imagine a salesman pulling it between thumb and forefinger and saying: "This is durable material. It will never lose its shape."

It rained. I gather it often rains in Paramaribo. When it is a gentle drizzle, they call it a "white rain" and expect it to go on for ever. When torrents flood the streets, blotting out the statue of Queen Wilhelmina, it is a "black rain" and due to stop within the hour.

What else do I remember about Paramaribo? Oh well, the cinemas, excessively lighted, and the Chinese pool-rooms where limp black negroes staked a month's wages on a single chance, and the size and splendour of the "Mevrouws."<sup>1</sup> They were large-limbed creatures, magnificently fair, with splinters of turquoise for eyes. Only I have never seen turquoises so blue.

The Surinam river flows lazily beside the town. It is the high road to Suhoza, where a timber company owns large concessions in the forest. It is also the best means of approach to the jungle.

From the first moment of my arrival, I said to

<sup>1</sup> Dutch women.

merchants, agents and officials : " How can I see a fire-dance ? "

Without exception, they looked at me as if I had asked for strychnine of a Piccadilly policeman. They gave me all sorts of things, a hat that melted in the rain, a negro servant who took off his trousers whenever he felt hot, the seed of a poison tree which looked like a blood-orange. And they said : " You can't. It's forbidden by the Government."

So I decided on a less conspicuous route to the interior. Remembering how the convicts of French Guiana make a habit of escaping from the huge prison settlement of St. Laurent, across the Maroni river on logs, or in a dug-out canoe, paddled by bush natives, and then through swamps and forests until they reach a Djoeka village where they can get food, I thought I might as well try the same road. Very little plotting was necessary. The captain of a coasting tramp procured me transport in the shape of an ungainly but serviceable canoe, with three blacks for a crew.

In the brief darkness before moonrise, I set out, wondering whether I should hear the crash of rifles behind me, as the guard turned out in pursuit of a supposed fugitive, but nothing happened.

In what seemed to me an unfortunate blaze of moonlight, I was landed on sand which shook and squelched. Naturally, I remembered every tale of convicts escaping the bullets of St. Laurent's warders to perish in quicksands known as "the Frenchman's grave." That these were much further north did not encourage me at all. Dragging what seemed to me yards of leg, one after another, out of the slime, I followed my guide towards Albina, the little white town which is an outpost of civilisation. But we avoided its streets and the comfortably verandahed houses, suggestive of mosquito-netting, long, cool drinks, fat bolsters known as Dutch-wives and all the other comforts which experienced colonists bring to the wilds. We made instead for a jungle road, where a lorry was supposed to be waiting. Needless to say, there was no sign of it.

For more than three hours I sat under a tree which



emitted the most curious sounds, for it was inhabited by Jumbe-birds, supposed to be the spirits of dead slaves, and waited, alternately sweating and shivering, while the enormous black who considered himself responsible for me, went in search of the lorry. He went soundlessly, but the jungle was full of noises. Things fell with the "dull thud" one reads about in detective stories, or slithered suggestively through all manner of vegetation. Other things dripped, swung, rattled and tapped. A procession of howling monkeys passed overhead. A bird screamed and I thought of the deadly oracucu snake and of the death-tree under which nobody wakes. The natives say it sheds a poisonous pollen. The T.T.T.s (typical, tropical tramps) who clutter the Amazonian trails, suggest it breeds a venomous insect. Altogether, it was an unpleasant night, haunted by beetles which hammered their wings like a prison bell, and toads as large as soup-plates.

With the first light the lorry bumped down the track. My friendly black, bereft of clothing, was seated astride the radiator. He brought me some cassava cake and a nauseous drink made from fermented papaia. It took us just under five hours to cover the forty-five kilometres to Moengo, centre of the bauxite mines, for the rains had begun, and in places the road was axle-deep in mud. Twice the lorry sank to its fenders and had to be dug out. Between whiles, it proceeded with back-breaking leaps which deposited the mechanic and me in a confused heap among the luggage. But Moengo was very much worth while, for the miners, large, blonde and hospitable, gave us a warm welcome and an assortment of gifts they thought might be useful. Within a few hours I'd collected an outsize in revolvers, a belt made of plaited grass, a pinch of gold dust for luck, and an outboard motor punt with a hammock slung under a tarpaulin, forward.

But information about the fire people was decidedly vague. "Much further inland, perhaps," said a geologist who knew something of the interior. "The Djoekas have all sorts of rites, of course. They can do a snake dance that

makes you feel queer inside, but it's the Saramacas who deal in this fire-stuff. They may be anywhere, or nowhere. In any case, it's a generic name, for the people you want aren't really Indians. They're three parts black, descendants of slaves shipped by Portuguese traders and settlers from Africa four hundred years ago, maybe. They've mixed with the local Indians who go further back into the jungle each year, but I should say the fire dance came originally from Africa."

Emboldened, I told my informant, who spoke a mixture of half a dozen languages and wore a yard of razor-sharp knife slung about his waist, that, at all costs, I must see a fire dance. I went on saying it to all the large, fair men who gathered round and they looked at me as if I were an amusing form of explosive. "You can't," they repeated. "It's forbidden by the Government."

"But it happens all the same," I protested. They talked in Dutch and smiled among themselves till one of them thought of beer. We drank it out of yellow gourds. And the outcome of a vast amount of conversation was that, towards nightfall, I found myself chugging down the Cottica river with a mixed crew, brown and black, in charge of the Paramaribo negro.

"Don't go the whole way to the capital. Cut across to the upper reaches of the Surinam. Avoid the plantations and don't go anywhere near the timber-camps, or they might stop you. Get right up country and get there quick," the miners had said, and a negro in a red loin-cloth, appearing for a moment out of a tangle of vine, had asked me for a scarf I wore and whispered:

"It's at full moon they do it and you must follow the drums. You'll hear them in the jungle and you mustn't let up following, but if they see you, you'll burn, and maybe, you'll burn anyway, for you'll want to get to the fire." He'd disappeared before I could question him.

I don't think I've got the proper sort of backbone for a hammock. However, having removed my shoes, I wriggled into the fringed net presented me by my hosts at Moengo

and immediately fell out again. It was then I noticed the strong current and the contiguity of the water. There was nothing to prevent one tumbling into it.

Doubtfully I returned to the hammock, and for some time succeeded in maintaining a defensive position from which storm and rapids failed to eject me. But when the dawn beat upon my lids, I turned too quickly, and after a short struggle, found myself sprawling on the deck.

Picking myself up, I yawned and looked at the jungle. The view, by the way, was interrupted by my particular negro, resplendent in sash, shirt and turban, but with nothing at all below the waist.

In the greyness, with a sheet of dew upon the leaves and steam drifting from the water, the jungle did not live up to what is generally expected of it. There were no cannibals, head-hunters, monkeys, or crocodiles. Reeds crowded the mud banks. Beyond them rose a smooth green palisade. Further away the green broke into hummocks which were growths superimposed one upon another, so that, if one happened to be imaginative, one could conceive the pullulation of jungle substances struggling for light, beaten down, crushed, buried in a green tomb.

As the light strengthened, I could distinguish between the creepers which poured over the edge of the forest. Vines, convolvulus, succulent tendrils with mouths of obscene pink flesh, wove themselves between the trunks, so thickly that a snake would have been hard put to it to pass. The trees struggled for existence. Cramped and held by the parasites living on their branches, the strongest of them fought their way upwards into the sunshine. When they reached it, they burst into flower, so that the top of the forest was carpeted with rich red and orange blossom.

The silence beat upon one's ear-drums. The scream of an invisible bird caught by a maca snake emphasised rather than disturbed it. For only death makes a sound in the daytime. Until then, hunter and hunted are too wary to advertise their presence.

At Suhoza, where smoke from the thatched huts mingled

with the vapours of the jungle, I repeated parrot-wise : " I must see a fire dance."

Immense Dutchmen who looked as if they had come straight from Hollywood, for they had all the right properties, revolvers, coloured shirts, an outsize in belts and the most lovely hats, turned up at the sides, laughed at me and said : " Go a little further."

So I went, and one evening, on the edge of civilisation, but certainly not beyond it, I found myself sitting in a shed, open on three sides, with an enchanting " Mynheer,"<sup>1</sup> a half-caste and my own particular negro, who'd thought the occasion worthy, not only of trousers, but of shoes.

A black beat upon a drum. The lazy echoes rolled about the shed and inspired to comparative ecstasy a chorus of negresses in shapeless cotton garments, with raw colour in their turbans and the kerchiefs they'd wound about their necks and waists. They chanted, without too much emotion, but as the drum quickened, their feet accentuated the rhythm. I was amused at the contrast between the work-worn bodies, which I imagined bent over market-basket or wash-tubs, and the thin nervous feet. These took charge of their owners, or ignored them. They danced a story of hope and passion, sorrow, despair, the wild gaiety of fauns, savagery, imagination and desire.

When I managed to look away from those fascinating and incongruous feet, I found the negresses were getting down to the business. It was still synthetic, of course, but it began to bear some resemblance to reality. In fact, it reminded me of a congregation of Holy Rollers I'd seen celebrating Thanksgiving at Memphis, Tennessee. I remembered the vast congregation crammed into a shed, facing all ways, and the voice shouting from a central pulpit. The men had worn neat suits and the women hats, but here and there some brazen colour had escaped, and crushed together, quivering with emotion, they'd chanted in the same nasal monotone as the negresses of Dutch Guiana. They'd been shaken by the same spasms

<sup>1</sup> A Dutchman.

and with similar gestures, they had expressed a commensurate ecstasy. The only thing lacking was fire.

In Surinam, however, ashes glowed at the further end of the shed. When the women began to roll from side to side, their eyes inverted, their mouths lax, a negro went out to get wood. We could hear him chopping up a packing-case. He returned with his arms full of laths and he arranged these carefully in the shade of a tent with the ends sticking out. The dry wood caught at once.

From the benches where they had been sitting negligently, sometimes clapping their hands, or swinging their heads to the accompaniment of a guttural gurgle, but, for the most part, taking no interest in the proceedings, a score of blacks arose. Round the fire they stalked, naked but for an abbreviated loin-cloth. Then they began jumping straight into the air and down again. Without warning, one of them who had thrust his arms into liquid chalk, so that he looked as if he wore gloves, leaped into the fire. His feet landed square upon the upright boards and crushed them flat. With one hand gathering his loin-cloth, stiff with some kind of grease, and the other outstretched, he milled about among the flames, laughing and kicking the burning wood.

When he sprang out, unhurt, the other blacks rushed to feed the fire. Logs, boxes, dry grass and branches, remnants of anything wooden, from a worm-eaten chair-leg to a broken bowl, were thrown upon it. Dancing, yelling, gesticulating, the negroes flung themselves into it and remained there. Embers were tossed about the shed. Smoke poured up to the roof. A lusty young buck dropped upon his knees and in the middle of the blaze scooped the red-hot cinders against his chest.

Pandemonium followed. The negresses flung back their heads and screamed. Everybody began to tear off whatever clothes remained to them. I looked at the man who had come with me from Paramaribo. He gripped the edge of the bench. His eyes started out of his head. From a corner of his mouth, which hung open, trickled a stream of saliva. I spoke to him, but he didn't hear.

Meanwhile, the other blacks had thrown themselves at the fire, dragged from it the largest brands and started a dozen other conflagrations. In these they revelled. Some of them thrust blazing wood into their armpits and between their thighs. Others forced live embers into their mouths, or rolled among the ashes, pouring handfuls over their breasts and hair. It was the most extraordinary sight, but it lacked a quality I couldn't divine. At no moment did the music, or the actions of the dancers, achieve that effect of inevitability which causes the audience to believe and feel with them. I watched a show and I knew it was a show.

When the young negro with chalked limbs dragged himself from the fire and fell upon his face, uttering the sort of grunts with which dervishes signify they are possessed, the Dutchman stopped the ceremony, and the fact that it ceased at once, provided the last touch of unreality.

The negroes chattered, shook themselves and spat. One of them beat the grunting man upon the back and buttocks. The treatment proved effective. His muscles relaxed. He got up, looking sullen.

With scrupulous care I examined those who had been most active in the flames. Their skins showed no signs of injury. There wasn't even a smell of scorching.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, impatiently.

"I don't know," retorted the Dutchman. "Self-hypnotism, perhaps, but there are people in the forest—I cannot say a tribe because the blood is mixed Indian and negro—who live familiarly with fire. It has no effect on them. Their dances are a form of worship. It is said that when they eat fire, they are refreshed."

"I'd like to see the real thing. . . ."

Mynheer shrugged mighty shoulders. "Ah, the real thing," he said, ". . . that is difficult."

I don't know why the Dutch Government has forbidden fire-dancing. As I first saw it, it seemed to be a harmless enough occupation.

"It is anti-religious," said a missionary.

"It encourages savagery," vouchsafed an official who,

being singularly intelligent and well-informed, knew exactly what I was about, but chose to look in another direction.

"You've got to admit it's against Nature. . . ." insisted an agent who doubted his own nationality.

I went further upstream. By this time, I had mastered the intricacies of a hammock. I slept at night instead of falling like all kinds of rubbish. With me went the half-caste and the negro, who thought clothes began above the waist.

The river narrowed. The jungle walls pressed in on us. But I remember little about that journey except the size and persistency of the mosquitoes, the number of strange insects which dropped upon us and were promptly slain, and a conversation about snakes. In Dutch Guiana there are two particularly deadly ones, the maca and the orocucu. I wanted a specimen of the former because of its protective colouring and its tail, which resembles a maca thorn. I asked one of the half-blacks who propelled the boat, if he could catch one for me, offering a handful of good Dutch guilders.

The negro from Paramaribo translated his reply. "Me walk in fire, but no catch maca. If fire good, me no hurt, but no good maca. Me touch maca—and too dead."

So I heard the difference between good fire and bad. The former is as wine, the latter burns. "But what makes a good fire?" I asked.

The negro found it difficult to explain. "The woman, she know words."

"What woman?"

After careful questioning, I gathered that among the fire-tribes, or rather the people of the fire, for the quality which renders them immune is not limited to any particular clan, certain women play the part of priestesses. They are not taught a known spell, nor do they inherit peculiar powers. But at any time before they reach the age of puberty, they may find themselves possessed of authority over the flames. The discovery often comes by accident and before they are old enough to know what it means. A mother may see her child playing with hot cinders and

## WOMEN OF THE FLAME

proclaim the fact to her neighbours. A blazing fragment may fall upon a girl's feet as she feeds the cooking-hearth, and finding herself unhurt, she will guess her condition.

Such a one is examined by a council of her people. If she passes the tests imposed on her, she becomes "a daughter of the flames," with power to direct and control them, but she must invent her own ritual. For no priestess will give her secrets to another.

As soon as child or maid has been proclaimed immune, it becomes the business of the whole community to see that she remains a virgin.

My unwillingly trousered negro translated for me a tale, true or false, of a fire-girl seduced by the handsomest young buck in the forest, and naturally terrified of acknowledging it. For the penalty of such an outrage on the part of a dedicated maid is death—and death by slow burning, which is not a pleasant form of dissolution.

In fear and trembling, she played her part at the fire festival which takes place on the last night of the old moon. The drums beat. The chorus of negresses shuffled and chanted. The flames leaped up towards the stars which hung entangled in the topmost branches. Strange shadows stalked between the trees. The negroes, grotesquely smeared with lime and the pollen of an amber flower, sprang higher and higher into the air. But when the boldest of them flung himself, wide-armed, exulting, into the fire, he screamed once—a terrible scream like an animal trapped. The blaze leaped at him and held him. He couldn't beat it off. Blanketed with flames, he dragged himself from the pyre. Nobody dared touch him. Accursed, he fled into the forest and was—announced the story-teller with satisfaction—quite undoubtedly burned to death. The girl? Oh the girl presumably met her just end in that same conflagration. And that's what came of making love to a daughter of the fire. The negro smiled and explained that one girl was as good as another and most of them easy as mangoes. Why get into trouble?

So we drifted slowly up-river, in an atmosphere of sweat



and citronella. It was not at all romantic. I wore loose trousers, boots crinkled like concertinas and a fly-veil which became entangled with my food. If I could have asked for one gift in all the world it would have been a Flit-pump.

But, one morning, as we moved over a pewter-coloured river, the half-blacks strained their bodies and their ears in attitudes indicative of prayerful attention. "Drums," they said.

Nobody else heard them. For hours we crept between the barricaded vegetation. We were in a side-stream where creepers hung into the water and mats of purple flowers stretched between the banks. By midday, I was conscious of sound. I could not place it. At one moment it seemed to be under my feet. At another it had receded round the next corner, far away, beyond the uttermost conceivable horizon.

Later, I could distinguish the beat of drums. They hammered in my own pulses. They did something curious to my stomach and I drew long breaths to ease the tension.

The half-blacks studied the palisade of jungle. I could see no break in it, but when the drums were upon us—my ears couldn't stand the strain nor my flesh the reiterated flailing—one of them indicated an aperture. I couldn't see it, but we went through it.

We left the boat tied to a liane, half buried by the roots of a tree, and I thought we should never find it again. One by one we went into the forest. It seemed to me virgin growth and I imagined it stretching to the Amazon or the Orinoco. But the half-blacks treated it as a highway. Once or twice they used knives on the creepers, but more often they inserted themselves where no gap showed and the growth closed behind them.

After what seemed to me a life-time, for one of my concertina boots had been dragged off in a swamp and a gentle-looking plant had clawed my face with inch-long thorns, we came to a clearing. The jungle closed it on three sides. On the fourth sprawled a few huts of mud and thatch.

Behind a fire, not at all spectacular, stood a girl, perfectly formed from throat to knee, but with the broad features and stunted legs of the forest. She wasn't doing anything in particular. She just stood there, naked except for a snake-skin twisted round her neck, but I had difficulty in looking away from her. And I felt controlled by the drums. All my actions were in time to them. If I lifted a hand, it was as a rhythmic gesture pre-ordained by the drums. They were the gods of the festival, father, mother and child, a trinity served by an ancient with a halo of white wool.

He crouched on his haunches behind the largest instrument, a barrel made of hide stretched on withes. He used a stick and the heel of his right palm to produce a deep booming note. The men with the two smaller drums employed their hands as if they were a dozen different implements. The doubled fist, the flat palm, the fingers bunched or separate, the ball of the thumb, all induced different sounds, so that the drums thundered a demand, or whispered incitement. But there was an undercurrent as if the heart of the earth beat familiarly in our own flesh.

We halted, silent, beyond the range of the light, but neither then, nor at any time, did the fire-people show they were aware of our presence.

A chorus of dark women, naked except for some sort of girdle which drooped below their waists, moved tenuously between shadow and light. They intoned in low, monotonous voices. Their hands and their feet wove patterns. They bent towards the earth as if they carried a burden on their shoulders. Nearer the fire were a hundred or more men, shining black, stark, lean and corded with muscles. They stood in a wide half-circle, their organs erect, their limbs barred with white, so that they looked half zebras and half men. As the drums quickened with an insistent, an intolerable demand, they executed mighty standing jumps which carried them high into the air.

Only the girl remained immobile. If she spoke, I was too far away to hear, but I saw her lean towards the fire, so close that the flames licked her body, and stretch out her

hands as if in supplication. She dipped them into the blaze and held them up dripping.

At that moment, I became aware of a monstrous figure stalking up and down in front of the other blacks. Its face was masked in paint or pollen. Tendrils attached to the ears suggested horns. Others drooped like exaggerated whiskers. The great black trunk was scarred with white, and the legs decorated in the same fashion. The creature's motions seemed to be controlled by invisible bars. So many paces to the right it moved, a swinging turn, and so many paces to the left. The effect was of unbearable frustration, but when the girl let her hands fall, the gesture released the figure from its imaginary cage.

With a shout and arms flung above its head, it leaped into the middle of the fire.

Simultaneously, the girl threw powder upon the wood, and the flames roared up, hiding the limbs of the man who threshed about among the blazing logs, delighting in them, tossing branches above his head, gathering them to him so that he was robed in fire.

I don't know how long he stayed there. At such moments, it is impossible to measure time. But when he sprang out of the flame, drunk with his own godhead, a number of blacks broke from the half-circle. Precipitating themselves into the blaze, they danced in it, bathed in it, seized the hottest fragments, held them in their hands, pressed them to their breasts and lips.

It is difficult to find words to describe such a scene. Indeed there are no adequate words. It was an orgy without suggestion of sex except the erection of the genital organs defying the flame. It was a saturnalia with no celebrant but the slender girl, from time to time throwing powder on the fire. Yet it preserved a certain simplicity, so that at one moment, I found myself thinking of a crowd of Brazilian cattlemen tumbling headlong into a river at the end of a hot day in the corrals. I remembered how they'd delighted in the water, diving deep into it, playing with it as something precious and familiar, drinking until they choked.

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The brown-black people of the forest found the same refreshment in flame. I watched them when they came out, stretching themselves and posturing as if they would make the fullest use of their newly strengthened muscles.

At first, the half-circle of blacks leaping from the balls of their toes as if they were spring-boards, maintained a control sufficiently startling in view of what was happening round the fire. But, when the already initiated began to drag branches from the pyre, their fellows rushed among them. Other conflagrations sprang up, driving a host of shadows into the jungle. Dark figures leaped upon them, scattering ash. As the fire gained strength, the wild dancers were hidden. Only their heads appeared, like flotsam on a sea of fire.

Where a blaze sank, men and women flung themselves on their faces in the attitude of those drinking from a stream. Embers dripped from their mouths. They pressed burning matter into their nostrils and ears. Maddened by their own immunity, they sought to destroy it, crunching the burning wood in their teeth and forcing white hot cinders between their buttocks.

The women who had been chanting in the shadows, now kneeled among the embers, scooping up ash and smearing it on the points of their breasts. Their heads were doubled backwards. Their stomachs jerked. With cries and long-drawn gasps they reproduced at once the supreme culmination of ecstasy and the death-rattle in a throat choked with blood.

The beat of the drums was a cat-o'-nine-tails. Flesh and spirit could stand it no longer. The pitch of madness was reached and passed. Dancers dragged themselves from the flames and fell to the ground where they vomited, their bodies arched, their faces violently contorted. A woman seized a knife and cut deep into the back of a man, but no blood flowed. A figure, neither male nor female, rolled in a dying fire, uttering the sounds with which one imagines life rent from a body, while a number of others, equally

insensate, leaped upon it and stamped as if they would grind it into the earth.

Then a man touched my arm. The negro from Paramaribo drew me back into the jungle. He moved like an automaton. The half-breed crew stumbled and lost their way. Nobody spoke. Nobody looked anywhere but at the obstacle in front of him. They might have been asleep.

The firelight failed. The screams gave way to the small secret sounds of night animals, but the drums went with us. They were under our feet, in everything we touched, and further away than imagination could conceive.

Dawn broke as we reached the boat. I didn't know it was there. In fact, I'd passed through some bad moments while my companions hesitated. Once or twice we'd retraced our steps. There was no sign of a path nor any reason, I thought, why we should go in a particular direction. Darkness and heat had been equally stifling. I'd fallen over protuberances which I'd imagined clefts and attempted to climb hillocks that were really hollows. So the earth had mocked me by changing shape and I had limped bewildered from one uncertain substance to another.

Imprisoned in the forest, we might rot before anyone found us.

With the first light I blundered against some huge arched roots and nearly fell into a stream. The boat was within arms' length. We scrambled into it and pushed out to the river.

Looking back, I could see no opening in the wall of creepers. The jungle kept its secrets, but across my eyeballs, in a band of fire, danced figures magnified by exhaustion and imagination.

Crouched in the bottom of the boat, eating a mess of bananas and cold meal, I saw the people of the flame in a state of perpetual motion, with one figure immobile among them. The girl had not moved. Throughout the dance and the orgy which followed, she had stood beside the



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original fire. So far as I knew, she had not spoken, nor had she made any motion except to throw powder on the flames. By contrast with the figures threshing round her, maddened by the immunity from pain which deified them, she might have been an image carved in the wood of a forest. I wondered how she contrived to maintain that air of the cloister in the middle of a debauch.

For a while we slept, but it was not very comfortable in the bilge. A vast number of insects sampled our blood, and the smell of negro flesh rose above the stench of corruption oozing from the swamps. I was glad when the Paramaribo black rolled into a sitting position, stretched and yawned—isn't it odd how a negro can yawn with his eyes as well as his mouth? The time was ripe for questions. I began at once. "What was the powder the girl threw into the fire?"

"Make burn more high. Come from root of plant, ground so small, see."

So there was no mystery about that. I probed further, and the man from Paramaribo consulted the half-breeds before replying. In this way I learned as much as they knew about the ceremony we had witnessed. It had been handed down from one generation to another. Centuries ago, before the first Dutch or Portuguese traders penetrated the Amazon, the men of the flame had tested their courage by such an ordeal. "Fire make strong," interpolated the black, and I remembered how Grühl and other travellers speak of African slaves being branded to increase the strength of their muscles.

According to the half-breeds, paddling slowly along the bank, the fire dance used to take place on the eve of battle. When a tribe made war on its neighbours, the warriors caroused with flame, instead of wine, drawing from the element the force and the courage they needed. Those who had known fire, need fear no human weapon.

I wanted to know more. Were they stimulated by the feeling that they had conquered the flames and were



therefore super-men, or did they believe that the ordeal had actually made them invulnerable?

Voices rose. It seemed that I'd started an argument. Then the black explained. "You see plant there? You eat stalk, so, and I hit you with knife. Not hurt at all. Same with fire."

I gathered, therefore, that the flames had the effect of a drug on people sensitised by tradition.

One of the crew said that fire rejected a coward. A warrior who had failed in battle could be forced to test his courage in the flames, and if one man accused another, the fire could decide between them. "Then it does burn sometimes?" I insisted.

Discussion followed. A wizened little brown man, more Indian than Negro, repeated that fire would not accept anything evil. So it became a version of the Bedouin ordeal where the accused must suffer a strip of white hot metal on his tongue. If it burns him, he is accounted guilty. If his mouth remains "clean," he is acquitted.

"And the girl?" I asked. "Why is she not affected?" It was difficult to explain what I meant, but with the memory of that still figure as the hub of a wheel, the focal point of a savagery it did not share, I elaborated the question.

"She no see—she no feel," said the black in a puzzled voice.

The half-breeds added their explanations.

I gathered the girl played the part of medium. In magic ceremonies, there is often one who sits outside the circle repeating some action, or a series of words. So long as he continues to do this the hierophants can hold their own against the spirits. Should he break the thread of speech, or movement, the balance of power is upset. So the "daughter of the flame" is not in a trance, but every vestige of her force is concentrated on controlling the fire. If for one moment she relaxes, immunity passes from the dancers. Blind to what is happening around her, she stands there,

tense as a charged wire. More apposite perhaps is the simile of a generator from which the current flows.

At any moment she can cease to produce it. At her sign, the dance ends and however mad the participants, they know when she gives the signal. This seemed to me the strangest thing of all, for most of the dancers appeared to have reached the stage of possession in which they were no longer conscious of themselves, or of anything else. But the black repeated: "They know—they know here——" He struck himself on the chest.

At the first timber camp the Dutchman asked: "Well, what was it like?" The most perspicacious added, "Different to what we showed you, hein?"

I nodded. In spite of the similarity of certain actions the quality and effect had been as different as—I sought for a comparison and found only the swinging of a child's cradle and an earthquake.

Immunity from the ordinary effects of fire is not, of course, unusual, provided the hierophant or victim is under a spell, or in a state of trance.

When I was in Tlemcen, a tourist centre of Algeria, I happened to be able to render some service to an Arab woman, with the result that she introduced me to her house as a friend. At that time I was very interested in magic and its component sciences. So the husband took me to see an initiation ceremony at a dervish monastery. It was one of the few occasions in my life when I have had to dress as a man, and as I never succeed in looking at all male, I'm always frightened. So, half stifled by the handkerchief wound across my mouth in imitation of the mountaineers, miserably conscious of my boots, the pistol and dagger in my belt and all the other uncomfortable appurtenances of masculinity, I stumbled into the *zawia*<sup>1</sup> after the Sheikh who, by that time, I think, regretted his invitation as much as I did. However, in the crowd of townsfolk and hillmen, the learned, the ignorant and the devout, I contrived to pass unnoticed.

<sup>1</sup> Sacred college of Islam.

Cross-legged upon a mat and in a suitably secluded corner, where I could shelter behind the broad shoulders of my host, I watched and listened.

Once a year, in such monasteries, the Sheikh summons the dervishes of the neighbourhood and all the youths studying for holy office, in order to choose from them a number of novices to fill the places of those who have died, or gone away. It is a trial, in which each proselyte shows what he can do in the way of mortifying and controlling the flesh.

The Sheikh, I remember, sat on a bench with a green robe over his knees and his hands hidden. In turn, each probationer knelt before him, with his head thrust under the robe, and I wondered if, in this position, he received a drug. It seemed to me that some of the men had their nostrils stuffed with herbs.

One by one, dervishes and neophytes applied such torture as their flesh could stand, until the whole bare room, whitewashed and brilliantly lit by a row of naphtha lamps hung from the ceiling, was full of whirling figures, gurgling and foaming at the mouth.

Most of them began by sticking a number of twelve-inch skewers through their cheeks and leaving them there. Then they seized the charcoal from the hearth and thrust it under their arms. The more advanced cut themselves with knives and ran staves into their chests. All the time they danced, whirling round and round on the axes of their own bodies and crying, "Zoh! Zoh!" in a deep monotone. In the final stage gasps broke from their throats and they threw themselves upon the floor. There they writhed, shaken, lifted into the air and tossed about as if by some extraneous force. When they got in the way of the other celebrants, servants of the zawia seized them and stamped upon their shoulder-blades, beating them with poles and kneading them with bare feet. Under this treatment, they grew quiet. When they were sufficiently recovered, they removed the skewers and other alien substances stuck into their flesh. The marks were scarcely apparent. No blood flowed, and

within half an hour at most, the deepest wound had closed. I looked at one man who had eaten red-hot coals and held others in the hollows of his emaciated body, but could detect no sign of injury.

On another occasion, when I was sailing a dhow along the coast of Eritrea, one of the sailors had what I should have called an epileptic fit. The cook ran for his pan of charcoal and, wedging open the unfortunate man's teeth, thrust a glowing ember into his mouth. I expected the instant dissolution of the patient. On the contrary, his rigidity relaxed and convulsions flung him from side to side. While the captain clung to his shoulders and a great, hulking slave to his legs, the cook thrust more live charcoal into his mouth and soon the man was picking out cinders himself and eating them. After he had devoured several fair-sized chunks, he fell against the side of the boat and remained immobile.

"Well, that's the end of him, and no wonder!" I thought, but he was only sleeping.

The sailors covered him, saying he'd sweat out the evil that had possessed him. When he woke, after six or seven hours, he had completely recovered. "That was a strong devil!" he said, overcome with pride at the thought of the amount of coal it had taken to make his inside too hot for the spirit which had established itself there.

On the borders of Abyssinia and French Somaliland I've seen the same treatment applied, and in connection with the girl priestess of Guiana, it may be noted that these African fire doctors are always women.

Storm-bound in a village high up in the mountains, with a cloudburst turning the only track into a torrent, I waited in a hut built of clay and roofed with millet straw, while a woman, crouched upon her heels, cooked supper. Several children played round the fire. A boy lay on some skins in the corner. He seemed to me to be suffering from ague and I offered what remedies I possessed, but the woman would have none of them. The fire doctor was coming.

Until then, best take no notice of the spirit. The more attention it attracted, the more it would show off !

At the height of the storm a drenched figure was blown into the hut. Wizen and wrinkled, with a torn "futah"<sup>1</sup> dripping from its shoulders, it resembled nothing so much as a bundle of sodden leaves. But the woman of the hut welcomed it with every expression of respect, and when the stranger extracted from her scant draperies a pot of still faintly glowing charcoal, her delight knew no bounds. "The fire-woman !" she explained. "A great doctor who can defeat the spirits. My son is saved."

The half-drowned creature seated herself beside the boy, murmured suitable incantations and fed the patient with scraps of charcoal as if they had been lozenges. I must say, when he stopped shivering, after swallowing with every appearance of pleasure a good handful of red-hot embers, she brewed an agreeably scented draught to the accompaniment of what I hoped were spells, and poured this down his throat. Curiously enough, he fought vigorously against the potion, and the woman of the hut explained that the fire had driven out the spirit, leaving a vacuum. The draught was to ensure that it did not return. "By Allah ! He is now full ; there is no room for sickness," she said with content.

Before I left, the boy was sleeping peacefully.

So much for the dervishes possessed by an emotion which puts them beyond reach of pain and enables them to control the flow of their blood and the condition of their flesh. So much also for the fire doctors, common enough in Africa. But only in Guiana, from where the forest spreads, without perceptible break, to join the vast and virgin growths of Brazil, have I watched men use fire as wine.

And when the scent of the jungle is in my nostrils, that curious scent compounded at once of growth and decay, I see the girl standing, brown, not black in the firelight, young and still and exquisite from throat to knee. She bends above the blaze as if it were a loving-cup and dips her arms in

<sup>1</sup> A sort of skirt.

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the flames, but slowly as if it were the simplest and most natural action. When she withdraws them, her hands are full of fire. It drips between her fingers. She holds it aloft. I see it red and glowing, wine in the cup of her hands.

## WOMEN OF THE LEAVES

### *Amazonia and Cochin China*

THE interesting end of the Amazon is not really so hard to reach.

Of course, Amazonia is unexplored in the technical sense of the word. It is altogether too large, too hot, too much upholstered with post-impressionist vegetation and too closely inhabited by nauseous insects to make travel agreeable, but a network of trails covers the "impene-trable" jungle. The "unknown" forests are familiar enough to the T.T.T.s (typical tropical tramps) who go into them with broken boots and come out with "bichus"<sup>1</sup> under their toe-nails.

Amazonia has its shifting population, white or semi-white. Into it go prospectors and bare-footed wastrels, an earnest scientist, an agent selling cooking-pots to head-hunters and tools of steel to pigmies who know only wood, sometimes a priest or an oil man, occasionally a merchant from Iquitos.

From the centre of the continent come adventurers of all nationalities, half-clothed or in rags, yellow, fever-stricken, swollen from the bites of insects. Strange folk come out, small greenish men who scarcely reach one's shoulder, and women with live parrots on their heads, vagabonds who have been gold-panning with the help of raw spirits, a doctor, his cases crammed with specimens and his head with what he has seen, but cannot believe, a missionary, his faith confused by experience. Lots of others emerge, for

<sup>1</sup> Generic name for all insects.

traffic, if not as congested as in Piccadilly, flows steadily between the Andes and the Amazon. The civilised seeking new ways of making money, press into the forest, and a variety of savages to whom money is no more important than clothing, leave it. The insatiable go down the trail and the sated come up it.

I remember so well the day I first met a head-hunter. It was on a black and muddy path that trickled through the forest in the neighbourhood of the Rio Napa. All sorts of improbable substances made progress difficult. For Amazonia delights in a joke and as she has an infinity of material at her disposal, she generally indulges her sense of ridiculous at the expense of her visitors. So leaves that really ought not to be leaves at all, hammer and yatter in the jungle as if a band of savages were having a high old time with drums, gongs and broken plates. And other leaves, about the size of an ordinary roof, fall suddenly, with the effect of a tent collapsing, and it is all very disturbing, especially if vampires have taken more blood than one can spare and one's sense of humour has been mislaid with the iodine!

On that particular day, a bush of kindly appearance had attacked us with dagger-sharp thorns. The scratches showed every sign of poison. We'd met a German in the last stages of exhaustion and in nothing else at all. His partner, he told us, had stolen most of his clothes. The forest had taken the rest. We supplied him with food, covering and quinine, but doubted whether he would reach the mountains.

After that, the bullock I rode slipped into a mud hole, and the guide pointed out that it ought to have been left at the last village. What was I going to do with it in the forest?

I didn't know. So I was still seeking a suitably caustic reply when the head-hunter made his soundless appearance. He was a pale yellow brown, and not at all terrifying, in spite of his girdle of hair from which depended what I took to be a crumpled leather pouch. Round his neck hung a bamboo tube with a scrap of fluffy white kapok protruding, and he carried a blow-gun taller than himself. It was the first I'd



seen and I thought it a clumsy weapon, although its eight feet of chanta palm was smeared with beeswax and so highly polished that it looked like ebony.

The man stood stock still, staring. The Indian from the village where my bullock should have been resting while I tramped in black mud, hastened into speech. It reminded me of birds twittering.

An insect that looked like a bean fell upon my wrist and proceeded to burrow into it. I was so interested in his methods that I only remembered to remove him as he was about to wriggle out of sight. Then his hind legs came off and I had to apply a match.

Some time later I noticed a girl peering between the leaves of a creeper. Her skin seemed to be much the same colour as the flowers, faintly gilded, but neither yellow nor brown. She was very small. Her hair hung straight and fine on either side of her face. She wore a couple of live parakeets by way of a head-dress. They sat there talking to each other and ruffling their feathers, while she craned forward to get a better view of us.

Smiles had no effect on her. I daren't move for fear she should disappear. So I waited, cramped upon my bullock, until she decided to emerge. Then I imagined her a child, for her face had a petal smoothness and her mouth was equally soft. With feet well apart, bent beneath the load she carried wrapped in bark and slung from a strap across her forehead, she stood some distance behind the man. In spite of her burden, her poise suggested the possibility of flight. At any moment she might vanish into the leaves from which she came, but the twittering talk continued.

At last it was arranged. The Jivaro, with the shrunken head dangling like a pouch from a belt made of his enemy's hair, would lead us into the forest. We should see a village. The Indian explained all this to a "mestizo"<sup>1</sup> from the plateau, who translated it into Spanish for my benefit. But the bullock could not come. There was no path. Por Dios, did I expect the animal to change itself into a snake?

<sup>1</sup> Half-caste Indian and Spanish.

Regretfully, I descended. With the trail disappearing amongst dense growth overwhelmed with creepers and steeped in perpetual twilight, I forgot the discomfort of a period during which I'd wondered if my mount had any joints at all. My feet seemed unfamiliar. I had the usual desire to remove my boots, but resisted it.

For the rest of the day we crawled, squirmed and otherwise penetrated where certainly no person of sophisticated aspect should have passed. By nightfall, little remained to us except the boots, which were a worse torment than any conceivable insect.

After several hundred years, it seemed to me, we came not to a clearing, but to a rather freer space, encumbered with shapes. Shadows appeared and disappeared with an irrelevance that I found annoying. Light glimmered. We'd seen so many fireflies and insects winking their tails as a sign of amorous intent, that I couldn't believe in the proximity of cooking-pots, until I realised that hillocks were houses and the shadows people.

Somebody gave me a gourd filled with a loathsome, but invigorating, drink. Subsequently, without caring to whom it belonged, I slept upon a couch which had all the disadvantages of a hurdle.

In the morning—and by the freshness of the light I judged it to be very early morning—I woke to find my bed composed of spears, the shafts alternating at either end. Similar stretchers were scattered about a vast hut made of leave-thatch supported on poles. The roof was high above my head and I judged the place to be at least thirty feet long. Cooking-hearths occupied a great deal of space and all of them seemed to be in use. Why any one house should need seven, eight, no, nine fire-places, I couldn't understand until the Indian, via the mestizo, explained that every Jivaro warrior has a number of wives who share a communal dwelling, but are entitled each to her own bed and hearth.

When I removed myself from the spears, women no bigger than twelve-year-old children appeared from all sides. They were shy and simple, with the quick, bright

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

eyes of animals, and they were obviously of a clean-bred race. For their skins were smooth leaf-yellow, their limbs well-shaped, although so thin that the bones acquired undue significance, and their features scarcely broadened. I recognised the girl who had been with the head-hunter, acting as a porter. She might have been a very young page in a medieval picture, or a Burne Jones conception of the beggar-maid. Unsmiling, she offered me a paste made of manioc which tasted like sour potatoes.

In the subdued light, filtered not only by the walls of the hut, but by the layers of vegetation arched above it, I made out a heap of the same mealy substance spread on plantain leaves. When the women had satisfied their curiosity, touching my hands and even licking them to see if the colour ran, pulling my torn garments and pushing their arms far up into my boots, they settled to the business of preparing more "giamancha." It was not a pleasant sight, for some of them, in the twenties and early thirties perhaps, were more or less toothless and their gums looked decidedly unhealthy. But with equal vigour, they broke up the manioc roots and thrust them into their mouths, chewing solemnly until they had reduced the material to a paste when they spat it out and heaped it upon the general pile.

I went out. The village consisted of a dozen or more huts, each as large as the one I had left, scattered about a glade or tunnel, in which a number of trees seemed to have been cut, although many remained to interfere with the symmetrical arrangement of the dwellings. Children littered the open space. They played with seeds, leaves, and some battered, dust-covered balls made, I supposed, of leather. I picked one up and found it a head, shrunken to the size of an orange, the hair cut short and the features sown up with fibre. The eyelashes were stiff as hedges, and the expression reminded me of an angry monkey.<sup>1</sup>

Behind the hut where I had slept, a man busied himself with the completion of a blow-gun. The mouthpiece had

<sup>1</sup> See *Eight Republics in Search of a Future*, for description of how these heads are shrunk.

already been shaped to fit his lips. Now he smoothed the surface with hot stones, taking them from a fire beside him. Other men were weaving material out of a rough bark fibre, but the women did not leave the huts unless a male called to them.

When the man with the gun had polished it to his satisfaction, he lifted it to his mouth and blew out his chest until it resembled a barrel with the ribs as cords. A loin-cloth fell from his waist and bright parrots' feathers decorated his hair. With his new gun and a woman porter, he went out into the forest.

The mestizo slept. The Indian from the last river village had disappeared. Aimlessly, I wandered about and after a while, I found the girl with the parakeets at my heels. I thought all the Jivaros looked rather sad. Perhaps they didn't get enough sunlight. And after all, it was scarcely worth while going to war on your neighbours under a propitious moon, and sawing off their heads with sharpened shells, and taking so much trouble to scalp and dry them if, after they had been displayed at a feast, where everybody got gorgeously drunk, the spoils were of no value except as children's toys.

But the girl who drifted behind me, making no sound with her bare feet, looked sadder than anybody else. I found myself wanting to give her things to eat, but she wouldn't touch them. Her eyes searched the forest and I thought she encouraged me to go into it, showing me where the creepers parted and where it was possible to squeeze between the branches. When I'd lost all sense of direction, we saw, a few feet in front of us, a small shape crouched upon the ground. It was a woman carrying a net of fibre. And further ahead we had a glimpse of a hunter with a feather in his hair. It was only for a minute. The sounds I'd made must have disturbed his game. With an amazing economy of movement they passed on, and the girl beside me looked as if she'd lost the world.

When the mestizo woke, he became extremely informative. I remember we sat upon a rotting trunk while he

talked about poisons. The Jivaros, he said, worshipped all sorts of gods, especially the Jaguar-Footed, whose tracks can be seen in the forest, but for protection, they preferred their medicine men. These made the sacred pots in which heads were brought to boiling-point before being filled with sand and ironed with flat stones. They predicted the rains and made poison from the jambi and barbasco vines, with which to tip darts, or kill fish, or dispose of an unwanted wife. But in the latter case, it was the woman who decided the matter. If she chose to commit suicide, nobody would stop her.

I asked why a Jivaro matron, accustomed to sharing her husband, if not her hearth, with half a dozen rivals, should wish to do anything so final. "Women," replied the mestizo, drawing a deep breath, for he was not clever with words, "well, women, it is known, have not much sense. Love takes them all ways, but when it once gets hold of them deep down, they get no pleasure out of it. In my opinion they would as soon die as live."

When the shadows lengthened, the hunter returned. Behind him plodded a little patient woman with a net on her back. Lowering it, she showed a large monkey. The dart had been removed, leaving no sign of a wound.

From the hut where we had slept, came the girl with the parakeets. She came so quietly that I didn't notice her till she stood beside the other and made a motion to pick up the monkey. It was only the ghost of a movement, a furtive, half-ashamed gesture that remained unfinished. The woman who'd been with the hunter drove her away, but without violence. All their actions were equally gentle and indefinite, but when the girl departed, it was as if she had been struck across the face.

"That one will take jambi-poison," said the mestizo, amused.

"Why?"

"Because she is no longer preferred."

"She won't have to work so hard," I retorted. For it

couldn't be much fun dragging heavy game through the tangle of the forest.

"How can a man show he loves a woman except by making her work?" asked the mestizo, with some malice, for he disapproved of white manners and of everything else to do with the whites, to whom he owed his inferiority complex, except the colour of their skins.

Next day, after we'd regained the trail and were already far from the Jivaro village, I caught a last glimpse of the girl with the parakeets. Creepers curtained the jungle. Parasite growths heaped themselves on the branches. Our footsteps made little sound. But the mestizo cursed when he stubbed his toe against a root. There was no wind, but ahead of us the leaves parted and for a moment a face scarcely more coloured than the leaves peered between them. Before I had taken two steps, it disappeared. Silently, the tendrils closed, and when I tried to push my arm through them, they offered the resistance of a wall. "What is she doing here?" I asked, bewildered.

"They always come far away to die," mocked the mestizo.

I told him his imagination ran away with him. But I remembered how, on the other side of the world, a woman of the leaves—they seem to share the same characteristics, whether they live in the forests of Asia, Africa or South America—had killed herself because she was "no longer preferred." As I trudged along the trail, avoiding all manner of thorns and swinging vines, the story filled my mind. I found myself re-living one scene after another to such an extent that I must have echoed the cry with which it ended.

"What is happening to you?" asked the mestizo, startled.

"I saw a ghost."

"Maria preserve us!" muttered the mestizo, making the sign of the cross and at the same time fumbling for the pagan amulets bestowed about his person.

"Not here——" I hastened to reassure him. "Years ago, and even then I'm not sure. . . ." But it's only among

street-cars and skyscrapers and the insistence of a savage civilisation that I doubt my ghost. When I'm alone and free to believe instead of just registering confused superficial impressions, I know I saw a spirit, or what passes for a spirit, in the forests of Cambodia.

This is how it happened.

I had been in Bangkok, which to me is the most beautiful place in the world. In the market, where I'd bargained for all sorts of treasure from red and green porcelain bowls emblazoned with the royal Garuda bird, to rice-spoons in the shape of dancing gods, I met an Englishman who must be nameless because, for all I know, he may by this time have fulfilled his ambitions and become a puissant personage. For the same reason he must, I'm afraid, remain without features or background. Let it suffice that he was very kind to me, that, in the fierce exultation consequent upon acquiring a rusty silver junk, I found I'd spent all his money as well as my own and that, on another day, in order to repay my debt, I went to his house by the river.

It was empty, but hearing from a servant that his master had gone to the French Consulate and would soon return, I decided to wait. The room into which the Siamese showed me was dim and full of perfume. I stood at the window and watched the sails on the river, while I decided that it was a mistake to grow datura<sup>1</sup> flowers so near the house. The scent clung to me as I moved, and I found it cloying.

Impatiently, I turned towards a table heaped with books. Behind it, against the further wall, stood a tall lacquer cabinet with a Buddha on the top. In front of the image burned a lamp, and on either side were offerings of rice and leaves in small lacquer bowls. With my hand outstretched towards a *Revue des Deux Mondes*, I glanced at the carpet in front of the cabinet. It was a particularly fine specimen from Isfahan, and in the middle of it, for a second, I thought I saw a woman, small, boneless, leaf-brown, bent with her forehead between her hands.

<sup>1</sup> Datura is the Indian death flower.

The illusion passed, and I attributed it to the heat and the overpowering scent, but I was relieved when I heard voices in the garden. A moment later, the Englishman came in with the young French Vice-Consul, whom I'd already met. We had tea, and we talked about my forthcoming journey into Cambodia. "I wish you'd come, too," I said. "It would be fun."

The Latin agreed with so much enthusiasm that I spoke hastily of the datura. "Why d'you like it so much?"

There was silence, one of those horrible pools of silence in which you feel yourself sinking.

"I don't," said the Englishman, at last.

"But the place is full of the scent." I sniffed and could smell nothing at all. Doubtless, my mouth fell open and my face registered the usual signs of lunacy.

"You must have been dreaming," said the Vice-Consul.

But I wanted to vindicate my common sense. "I thought I saw some in the garden."

"Did you?" My host's expression was too grave for curiosity. His eyes held a deep wonder.

A week later the three of us were in the rest-house at Chantauboon, preparatory to crossing a good deal of Cambodian forest for the purpose of visiting the loveliest of all dead cities, Angkor of the great, grey towers and the carved dragon staircase.

The British Minister had been caustic. "If you must go," he said, "you'd better take a coffin with you. Wood is deuced expensive in Cochin China." Adjusting a monocle, believed by his staff to be solely decorative, he had added: "On second thoughts, why don't you take —," well, let's call him "James." There must be a lot of "James's" East of Singapore. "A holiday would do him good, and he speaks the language to the last guttural choke, which I confess is altogether beyond me."

But "James" hadn't wanted to come. He had been a delightful guide to the unexpectedness of Bangkok, displaying a knowledge of native life unequalled even by the professor who'd spent ten years cataloguing the royal



manuscripts. Glamour, acquiescence and a peculiar pathos hung about him so long as there was no question of leaving Bangkok, but a totally different man appeared when I spoke of the forests bordering the Shan States, where the women are slim and shy and leaf-brown.

So I went to the French Consulate and they assured me "Under the wing of France, madame, you can travel anywhere with a security of the most complete." In addition to which they presented me with a vast official document sealed with at least a saucerful of red wax. Simultaneously, they told me that the Vice-Consul, who preferred to be called by the least of his names, "Jean, quite short; not more than Jean if you please, madame," would have the greatest felicity in accompanying me. Now "Jean" was generally known as "Bel Ami" and with this in mind, I decided that the party would be greatly improved if "James" could be induced to reconsider his decision.

So I acted on impulse, which is a thing I have never ceased from doing for as long as I can remember, and it's always a mistake. I went alone, in the moonlight, along the river bank between great flowering trees shaped like roofs and tea-trays and umbrellas and queer-sailed craft to the house of James. It was in darkness, but I pushed open the door and immediately, while I slipped about on the polished floor, I smelled datura scent. I suppose I looked first at the carpet in front of the Buddha, and in the streak of moonlight which lay across it, I imagined a figure kneeling. I thought I heard the clink of anklets and the stir of a stiff native skirt. Then James spoke to me from the next room: "What are you doing? Wait while I get a light."

I had never heard his voice so harsh, and even when a lamp had been lit and I had explained about Jean, and my involuntary host had offered me a cigarette and told the boy to bring coffee, he did not relent. "You'll be all right. I'm convinced you're quite capable of ensuring Bel Ami's discretion——" but all the time, while he mocked, it was from the other side of a barrier. In such a mood he seemed to me detestable, so I apologised for an inopportune visit.

James said nothing. But as we walked along the path with tall scarlet poinsettias tugging at their stems as if they had been sailing boats moored against the tide, he asked: "Did you smell anything?"

"Yes."

Upon which he caught my hands. "You didn't see——"

"No," I replied firmly. For I felt my imagination running loose. In another moment I might believe in James, which would have been disastrous for both of us.

"Well, I shan't see you again," he said on the river bank.

But at the last moment he had changed his mind. At the very last moment, when the gangway was on the point of being hoisted, when the spider-like craft which had hung round the tramp were skimming across the river to the accompaniment of much shouting and splashing, he had come aboard with a pigskin suitcase and a bundle mysteriously wrapped in scarlet cloth.

"What on earth is he carrying about with him?" I asked when we all arrived at Chantauboon and I saw a coolie bent double under the weight of James's mystery.

"It's the Buddha," explained Jean. "He never goes anywhere without it."

"How silly! The thing'll need a horse to itself."

Of course, I wanted to know the story of James's image, which might, I thought, be the story of James himself, but I didn't want to hear it from Bel Ami.

"Chère et charmante dame, you will see 'the thing,' as you disrespectfully call it, will have the best horse."

He proved to be right. Next morning I emerged from my room to find pale tea, poached eggs and carrot mash waiting on the verandah. James was superintending the loading of a dozen coolies, each of whom carried a pole with a fibre basket slung at either end. Shrill voices argued over the balance of the loads. Under a tree clustered a group of mouse-like ponies. James ordered the scarlet bundle to be placed upon the only animal which appeared to have any strength at all.

With the feeling that the unusual circumstances, the

hollow appearance of the Englishman, and the unreal light preceding the dawn were sufficient to justify nonsense, I said to Jean, "It is as if he were travelling with his own corpse," and was horrified when the Vice-Consul nodded agreement.

For several days we travelled leisurely through the forest, led by an enchanting Siamese, who had been a court interpreter, though how he achieved the dignity I cannot imagine, for he rarely used more than two sentences. "Arriver bientôt," and "Pas moyen de faire."

We spent the first night at a primitive wooden temple, where the priests gave us coconuts to drink and allowed us to sleep on the floor at the feet of their gods. After that, we sampled a variety of "salas," sheds of plaited bamboo, open on two or three sides, the roofs supported on poles and the floors raised a few inches above the ground. We used to go to bed with the sun, for we had no lamps. And we took care to halt an hour before dusk so that we had time to cook eggs and rice before discarding our riding-boots and rolling ourselves in our rugs in the furthest corner of the "sala" with the guide in vest and sarong beside us, and the coolies heaped beyond him.

We had to carry all we needed to drink, and washing was reduced to a minimum. Every morning the Siamese produced a kerosene tin full of none too clean water. In it we all "bathed," first the Europeans, then the guide, who invariably asked: "You clean now?" before covering his face with rice powder which only adhered in patches, and last of all, the coolies.

Before the sun rose above the mountains we had started our march through gradually thickening forest. In the few villages, built of bamboos and reeds, we bought coconuts and sometimes loquats. The women were slender and lovely. If it happened to be a feast day, they wore dozens of yellow glass bangles and short silk double-breasted jackets over their sarongs. They covered their faces with thick white powder and shaved their hair into rings, under a tiara of small yellow orchids.

## WOMEN OF THE LEAVES

Sometimes we met priests in trailing sulphur-coloured robes, with crimson stoles round their necks, but when we reached the jungle, where a thick green gloom obscured the trail, we had it to ourselves.

The undergrowth and creepers hid thorns which rent our clothes. Orchids and an amethystine flowering-tree hung over the path. A sharp, sweet scent emphasised the coolness.

The forest is supposed to be full of elephants and small tigers, but we saw nothing until, one day, a beast crashed into the bushes and James decided he must have a shot at it. Cautiously we followed its trail. A swift, fawn shape streaked ahead of us. Evidently, another hunter had the same idea. James fired and wounded a panther, but it dragged itself out of sight. The men insisted on looking for it in particularly dense jungle. This reckless proceeding lost us the path, which had never been very clear. After an hour or two's wandering, punctuated by the guide's "*Arriver bientôt,*" which changed, in the late afternoon, to a doleful "*Pas moyen d'arriver !*" James took charge, with the result that, towards sunset, we came upon a village in a clearing beside a stream.

Ankle-deep in the water stood a number of small, slight women with the faces of children. For a moment they stared. Their hair hung smoothly on either side of their faces. Their eyes were deep and quick, like the eyes of forest animals. Their skins held the colour and something of the texture of leaves, and when they recovered from their surprise, they sprang for the shelter of the forest, disappearing without sound, with scarcely a movement of the branches to mark their passage.

The stream promised a bath, so I turned to James, delighted, "You seem to know Cambodia even better than Bangkok?"

"I do."

After fifteen years, I remember the man's appearance. He'd slipped into a swamp and was caked with mud. He never wore a hat if he could help it. A thorn had scratched his forehead and the blood had dried where it dropped. His

lips were set, and his eyes had the queer inverted look of one who sees more than is actually in front of him.

To relieve the inexplicable tension, I said, "Let's go straight to the village."

"We must go straight past it. There's a rest-house further on. We can spend the night there."

Naturally, I argued. Why waste a bath and the probability of fresh food?

But Jean, on whose indolence I'd counted as an ally, supported his colleague. "There are reasons why we cannot ask for hospitality in this place. Let us hurry. What a bad chance to find ourselves on this path."

"It is the only one," said James.

He strode ahead. The rest of us followed. In silence we skirted the village. But just as Jean had expressed relief, "Mon Dieu, we are well out of that!" a man in a yellow robe appeared in front of us. He had been gathering coconuts and he carried them in a net on his back. With a polite salutation, he pressed into the bushes, waiting for us to pass. Then he saw James, and his load crashed to the ground. For a moment, he made as if to bar our passage. His hand went to the knife in his girdle. Then, still staring, with so strange an expression that I remembered it all evening, he stepped backwards into the forest. The branches closed. No sound showed the way he went.

My pony chose that moment to stumble and I promptly pitched over its head into a thorn bush. The Frenchman picked me out of it with less than his usual care. "Quick, quick!" he urged, thrusting me back into the saddle and striking the animal across the quarters. "The light is going."

"Who was that man? What did he want?" I asked, indignant because nobody seemed to care how many thorns were sticking into me. Jean's reply concerned the folly of getting oneself mixed with natives, especially such primitive and inexplicable folk as these forest dwellers. "They have no brains," he said, "only emotions," which was, perhaps, the French equivalent of the mestizo's, "They would as soon die as live."

In the short twilight, no more than a punctuation between day and night, we arrived at what should have been the rest-house, and found it had been destroyed by the last rains. A shed offered some sort of shelter. So we arranged to sleep in it, while the coolies camped under the nearest heavy-leaved trees.

For me, of course, it was adventure. Stimulated by the glamour of the night, by the furtive sounds which suggested the forest might not be as empty as it seemed, by the shapes and shadows moving beyond range of the fire, I was absurdly gay and to my surprise, James followed my lead. I remember how we laughed when disaster attended the cook's efforts to improvise a grill.

"I don't mind," I said, eating something which tasted like ashes wrapped in skin. "I don't mind anything." And I thought what fun it was sleeping in mid-jungle under the stars, with mystery in the person of James.

Rolled in a variety of rugs, with Jean beside me, I watched through half-closed lids while the other man unwrapped the Buddha and set it reverently upon a throne made of saddle-bags. Subsequently I saw him go out in the night and return with some small object, which he laid in front of the image. Sandalwood, I thought, and wondered if the end of James would be in a monastery high above among the forbidden passes of Yunan. The yellow of his face would suit him. Fasting would accentuate the asceticism of his already bloodless face.

I slept, and woke from a dream of James in saffron, clicking a prayer wheel, to the consciousness of another sound. At first I thought it was the clink of heavy silver of the noise made by the anklets of a Siamese, but the women of the forest wear nothing but a loin-cloth and a necklace of brown-gold as their skins.

I listened more intently and realised that the floor on piles, shook under soft footsteps.

Without moving, I could see the outline of Jean asleep, his head burrowed into a pillow and his blanket pulled over his head. Beyond him, in the starlight, I could distinguish

Englishman's face, a mask drained of every expression, outlined against the dark mass of the Buddha. At the exact moment when I realised that the footsteps did not belong to either of my companions, I became aware of an overpowering scent of datura. With what I intended to be a yell, but was really, I suppose, only a half-strangled squawk, I scrambled out of my coverings.

Then all sorts of things happened, and even at the moment it was difficult to distinguish between reality and imagination. For the shed opened three sides to the forest. And the figure in a yellow robe, with a knife in its hand, appeared against the most fantastic background, on which shapes were superimposed without bulk. I knew that the victim would be James, and with the intention of preventing a murder, I hurled myself across the shed. Unfortunately, I'd forgotten the Frenchman and I pitched straight over him. While I fell, hitting my head against somebody's discarded boots, while I picked myself up with Jean gasping and clutching at me under the impression he was being assassinated, I thought vaguely if James didn't wake now, he puldn't wake at all. Then I saw the woman.

Her hair hung straight, after the fashion of the forest, but she wore a striped sarong. I had an impression of jewellery from a flower in a nostril. While I struggled to free myself I saw Jean, with the nightmare sensation of limbs weighted. He saw the woman catch the intruder's arm. He hesitated. He turned to look at her. For a moment, I saw it all clearly, the night leaf-brown figure in incongruous silks clinging to kicked Jean with the knife. And the next moment, having the Earl Jean in the face and let forth a screech which roused arm and Englishman, it was I myself who had seized the upraised life. I was holding on to it while the whole shed came to

James violent scrambled to his feet. The floor swayed with the puzzled, novements of the Frenchman. The interpreter's After "Arriver bientôt—vite!" sounded outside.

At one moment I lost consciousness of the sequence of events. At another moment, half stifled by an intolerable scent, I was

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wrestling with a creature whose robe tore in my "smelled the next, he'd disappeared into the forest, with pursuit; the Siamese was calling to the coolies, and had flung himself on his knees beside me. He called me by a strange name and talked to me in a language of which I understood no word.

"She's gone!" I said stupidly, and repeated it because I couldn't think of anything else to say. The scent also had gone.

Slowly the man's hold relaxed. I daren't look at him, but I stared curiously at my hand which was covered with blood. So the knife had been real anyway.

Embarrassed, uncertain, I stumbled out of the shed. James followed me. The next moment, while we walked without direction or purpose, he was telling me the story of the girl he'd loved and discarded because it had been indicated to him that his ambition could not otherwise be served. I can't remember his exact words, but they were awkward and without polish. He'd taken the girl from the forest and brought her back to it because he couldn't bear to tell her in Bangkok. "We camped by the river," said James, "not far from her father's village. The Buddha belonged to her. She took it with her wherever she went. On the night when I told her, she was crouched beside it. She touched the hand hanging down, but she wouldn't let me touch her. She lay on a mat at the other side of the tent and she said nothing, but in the morning she was gone."

James put a hand to his forehead and took it away wet. He was re-living the agony of the moment when he'd learned the meaning of datura. "The place was thick with scent. She'd gone out and got those ghastly flowers and wrapped them round the Buddha. You've smelt them yourself. I can't get away from them. I don't want to. For when the scent's strongest, she comes to me. I see her clearly. You did, too . . . it's no use lying. And to-night I thought for a moment I touched her."

James paused. In a dreary voice he added: "I suppose you saved my life." He didn't seem at all grateful. I wished



## WOMEN CALLED WILD

Englishman show a more imposing wound, but he hadn't lined a noticed my hand.

The man we saw outside the village was her father, a priest of sorts. I suppose he thought he might as well revenge his family, or his gods . . . I don't know which . . . since it could be done so conveniently." His voice was bitter, his face more than ever like a mask. Most certainly James's ambition had let him down.

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"We looked for her all day, and just as it got dark we found her body in the river."

James stared at the jungle where the coolies were threshing about, making a lot of noise. Then he looked at me. "You've hurt your hand," he said, as if it were a matter of a cut cake. "Better let me tie it up." We returned to the shed.

Never again did James refer to the subject of his brief departure from the ways signposted to success, but when I left Cochin China, he gave me the Buddha. He did not do so gracefully, or with the well-chosen words in which he delighted. At the last moment, when once again a tramp steamer was about to weigh anchor, he marched on board and thrust into my arms the image wrapped in a scarlet cloth. Protests had no effect on him. "I'd like you to have it," he said, and went ashore.

The gift considerably delayed my journey across other regions of Buddhist Asia. For whenever I was particularly pressed for time, porters, in various stages of nudity, insisted on repeating interminable orations to the image. It required a special horse, for it seemed to grow heavier with every frontier crossed. It had to be smuggled through the Customs of diverse countries in a hold-all. "Just a bundle of rugs," I would remark. "Heavy? Oh surely not!" Coins changed hands. A dejected porter would be told to look sharp and not waste all day over a piece of paltry hand-luggage.

In China they thought it a case of opium. In America their minds turned to bootlegging. The man staggering

with it aboard an Atlantic liner remarked that it "smelled like a stiff."

In mid-ocean a polite steward brought me the remonstrances of fellow-passengers. They said that the gangway into which my cabin opened fairly stank.

"Do you smell anything?" I asked with curiosity, for, after that night in the forest, I'd been immune from the perfume of datura.

"Can't say I do, miss, but there's them as has."

In London a servant gave notice for no reason he could satisfactorily explain. He hadn't exactly *seen* things, but he'd *smelled* them and it made him sick.

To-day the Buddha stands on a tall cabinet with offerings in lacquer bowls and a Persian rug in front of it, but I never see the leaf-girl kneeling in the moonlight.

She remains, in my mind, small-boned and supple, with gold-green skin and the wide quick eyes of an animal, but whether she is of Asia, Africa or South America I do not know. For the people of the leaves are kin in their few and quick reactions. If they are savages, it is because they are afraid. Fear, to them, is the basis of all emotions, a fear of living which imprisons them between their walls of forest, with their gods and priests and medicine-men. When they can endure fear no longer, in any of its hundred forms, they seek relief in the river, or from the jambi vine. "They would as soon die as live," said the mestizo.

## PRIESTESS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

### *Lyons to Haiti*

THE trail began in Lyons. I'd been over-driving a new car along those endlessly straight roads, bordered by poplars. As I approached the city of silk, set proudly upon her two rivers, something happened to the driving-pinion. A fearful clatter arose, but being ruthless where cars are concerned, I succeeded in reaching an hotel.

It was late, so I thought I would dine before looking for a garage. Within a few minutes I found myself seated on a hard red seat in a restaurant which had just been redecorated. Everything glittered. The walls broke into festoons. The lights leaped out of gilded cornucopias. "It is very cheerful, is it not?" said the maître d'hôtel.

I agreed, but while I waited for the soup, I wondered what effect the room had on its habitués. It seemed impossible that anybody could make a habit of such unsympathetic surfaces. The walls fairly shrieked their determination to obtrude. The ceiling resembled one of those tropical thickets, with all sorts of parasites hanging from the branches. I was staring, fascinated, at a growth suggestive of a cancerous pineapple, when I became conscious of the woman in the corner. I don't know how I knew she was there, because I was still looking upwards. But I felt a sudden demand on my attention, and there, very dark and simple against the horribly shining walls, sat a woman with a red blouse.

At first it was just her outline which pleased me, and the sombre brown of her skin. She was a mulatto. Her face

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sloped backwards from the chin, and the slopes were only broken by the lips and nostrils. These were dark purple and curved upon themselves like petals. The flesh shone as if it had been gently oiled and the hair was equally smooth.

With gratitude my eyes rested on the angles visible under the plain black coat and on the fingers holding the cigarette. The woman looked in my direction, but not at me. All through dinner, I tried to decipher her expression. At first I imagined an intolerable boredom. Then I decided she was too far removed from her surroundings to be affected by them. If she felt anything, it was from a distance. It must be satisfactory, I thought, to be so armoured.

I drank several cups of coffee in order to watch her sitting there, smoking, with a delicious parsimony of movement, and when she left the room, I felt as if I'd been robbed. The maître d'hôtel explained. She was an artiste, very popular. He would give me the name of the boîte where she sang.

At the garage they said, "Two days at least, possibly three. They'd have to wire to London for a new race. It could be sent by air." From habit, I requested the patron to hurry.

Ten minutes later, I was established in the café mentioned by the head waiter. The contrast seemed to me agreeable. Ordering a bock, because I couldn't think of anything else, I watched the crowd increase. It was not a gay sight, for the clients were respectable bourgeois in their business suits. The women who accompanied them were equally sober. Against the dark and faintly gleaming panelling, hung rows of faces that resolved themselves into balloons, rather shabby and deflated. These drifted in a haze of smoke above the black bulk of shoulders, under black hats or black hair. Red wine provided the only colour.

It seemed to me that I sat there for a long time, half asphyxiated, lighting one cigarette from another, because the man next to me relished a particularly foul cigar. The mulatto came in without my seeing her, but suddenly there was a splash of scarlet where the orchestra had been. She still wore the suit which showed her bones. With a cross-

bred instrument on her knees and her hand sweeping the strings as casually as it did anything else, she began to sing. Her voice was low and rough. It tore the words from depths of darkness and dropped them as if they were too heavy to hold.

For an hour she sat on a cane chair, scarcely moving. Without a smile, looking always in front of her, grave but not sad, she sang in that same voice. It did not change. And the stillness in the room ached. I could feel the men in dusty coats, polished at the elbows, with a day's growth on their chins, and the women, roundly corsetted, with curves upholstered in durable black material, suffering and liking it.

There was no appreciable pause between the songs. The mulatto pleased herself, paying no attention to her audience. I doubt if she saw it. She gave the impression of being surrounded by space and of seeking words in it. Sometimes she struggled with them, dragging them as if it were from the earth and caressing them while they were still raw. I thought of forests and desert while I listened, for the voice held the harshness of sand and the deadly quiescence of the jungle.

For three days I stayed at Lyons, and every night I went to the café. I got to know the singer by the simple expedient of offering her a lift when it was raining in torrents and I'd secured the only taxi. Thereafter I spent most of my time with her. She did not welcome my company, but she accepted it without complaint. I used to sit in her room, always too hot, and watch her lying on the bed, blowing smoke through her nostrils. She wore the same suit, cut like a man's, the skirt almost as narrow as a trouser leg. In it her body achieved the most exquisite poses, but she was as unconscious of her grace as an animal rolling on a mud-heap. I don't remember that she ever said anything particularly interesting, although she told me of her upbringing in Haiti, where she would return as soon as she'd finished a contract she regarded as an evil spell. But without talking, she represented for me an excitement which I didn't even want to understand. In her thin, tailored coat, shaped by her

bones, she depicted a worn and rather weary sophistication. But one day she showed me the charm she wore round her neck. It was sewn in a little red bag decorated with cock's feathers. A mamaloi<sup>1</sup> in the mountains had given it to her. As she touched it, I saw her lips slackened and protruding, the whites of her eyes glinting through the faint tracery of veins. At that moment, she was far removed from Lyons, a negress in whose affairs the whites had no part.

When I left, regretting the assiduity of a London agent who'd despatched race and pinion-thrust within an hour of receiving my telegram, she said to me carelessly, "If you come to Port-au-Prince, tell me . . ."

"But how shall I know if you're there?"

"I shall be there."

"Give me an address, then."

"It isn't necessary. Ask for Françoise." The name struck me as ludicrously unsuitable.

Well, I didn't go to Port-au-Prince for some years, and I hadn't meant to go there at all. But, flying over Haiti, I caught a glimpse of desert spattered with cactus. I saw mountains heaped together and girt by shadows which the pilot called "gulches." They sounded wild. I thought I'd like to see more of them.

So I removed my meagre thirty pounds of luggage from the plane bound for the Antipodes and provided myself with lodging in an hotel that looked like a pink sugar-cake crumbling in the heat. Plaster fell whenever I leaned against a wall. The doors hung from their hinges and a frog enjoyed himself vastly in the bath, but if I looked out of the window, the bougainvillea was a streak of raw colour which remained like brightly coloured gauze over my eyes. By twisting my neck, I could see the end of the houses and beyond them, a jungle, with frenzied palms sticking out of it. Further away the rust-black of the mountains seared the sky. I imagined marks left on the clouds as if by hot irons. It was a delicious and fantastic sight and I would have been content with the medley of sixteenth-century colonial

<sup>1</sup> Priestess of voodoo.

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

palaces, dominated by the fortress of the black King Christophe who defeated Napoleon's army, had it not been for a gentle creole called Bonaparte. He attached himself to me with the persistence of an intelligent mongrel. I couldn't get rid of him. Wherever I went, there also went Bonaparte, preceded, as it were, by his teeth, for he had a magnificent smile. The rest of him was inadequate and his clothes still more so, but he always wore shoes, a sign of success in Haiti.

One day I spoke to him of Françoise. If I remember rightly, we were riding through sugar-cane and the soles of Bonaparte's shoes flapped in time to his donkey's ears. A negress with a girdle of turkeys hanging from her waist had just passed us. The contrast with the girl in the black suit amused me. I felt equal to any effort that would allow me to see her again.

But there was a little silence. Then Bonaparte turned to me his smooth and slightly luminous face. His flesh had the lusciousness of damp earth. "You will come to her village?" he said in a mixture of French and creole, which I find it impossible to reproduce. "Now?" I protested, energy slipping from me for, in Haiti, it is easier to contemplate effort than to make it. "Why not?" said Bonaparte. There was no reason, so we went.

I suppose I imagined another pink house with the plaster hanging like the tongues of thirsty dogs. I supposed it set in a garden, the gate broken, vines running riot. It would be cool at least. There would be orange trees and lemons and Françoise, more polished than anything I'd ever seen, in the . . . no, surely not in the black suit, but in a garment equally apposite.

What I actually saw an hour or so later was a village of thatched mud and wattle huts, with black children playing in red earth. We stopped in front of a house no different from the rest except that a banana tree waved monstrous leaves above the roof. Through the opening, where a door had never been, I saw a mat made of palm fibre and on it a figure in a comparatively clean overall, a version of the

"Mother Hubbard" imposed by the earliest missionaries upon the clean grace of South Sea limbs. "Ti Françine! Hé Françine!" called Bonaparte, his legs stretched out scissorwise. The figure rose. Its bush of coarse hair held flakes of mud and leaves. Sweat polished the skin. The shapeless garment hung loose upon those tantalising bones, but it was Françine, and Françine unchanged. For she had the same air of standing in space. There was perhaps a more abundant richness about her lips and nostrils, the flavour of fruit instead of petals. But she received us unsmiling, and when we entered the hut, furnished only with a palm-wood couch and a low table, laden with gourds, cheap crockery and a broken mirror, I was exasperatedly conscious of the distance between us and of my desire to cross it, although our knees touched on the edge of the pallet.

We talked without much purpose, while Françine skinned one of the small bananas known as figs. Sucking her fingers, scrabbling her toes on the mud floor, she remained detached. Her face had no connection with the ridiculous overall. It gave me the same impression of being out of place, but quite indifferent to its position, as a mask from some monastery in Central Asia, hung above a cretonne-covered chesterfield.

When I left, I felt I'd made no progress, but apparently Bonaparte thought differently. He was evidently much impressed, for, as we rode back, through woods and cane, he said several times "It is a pity you are white." He told me of Françine's imposing connections. Her aunt was a famous mamaloi, one of her cousins a hougan<sup>1</sup> of even greater religious rank. Apart from such clerical relatives, for Voodoo is a religion based on an ancient African cult, with tags of Christian ceremonial added because the slaves imported from "Guinea" by the original French settlers were immediately baptised, Françine numbered among her kin a Nebo<sup>2</sup> who could make the dead speak.

So I found myself introduced to Voodoo, about which generic name, covering spiritualism, superstition and a

<sup>1</sup> High priest of voodoo.

<sup>2</sup> Magician.



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living faith, there is much whispering in the clubs and drawing-rooms of Port-au-Prince. For while foreign officials, merchants, bank managers and the hard-boiled men of business from the American Sugar Company are drinking cocktails on the club verandah, gods or spirits may be entertained in the huts of the servants' quarters.

Corpses raped from their graves before they have time to rot, may be working in the cotton-fields. A deity may become incarnate in the body of a beggar. A girl or a goat, spell-bound, so that for the moment their entities change places, may suffer the same pangs when the former dies in the body of the latter. A strong young man may perish in agony, without any reason at all, except that, on the other side of the island, an enemy has made a wooden doll in his image and is slowly unwinding from it the thread of life. A girl dressed as a hermaphrodite may play the part of oracle and as "Papa Nebo," speak with the voices of the dead. It all sounds quite impossible, and so far as I have seen and heard, it is all true, although I do not know how much can be attributed to occult forces and how much to drugs and hypnotism.

For instance, the Haitian Penal Code (Article 249) contains this paragraph: "Shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma, more or less prolonged. If, after the administration of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder, no matter what result follows."

In this passage perhaps may be found the explanation of the Zombiés, those terrible tranced figures with dead eyes which can occasionally be seen working in lonely places. But the negroes bury their dead within reach, or in a public place and under as much masonry as possible, to protect them from sorcerers who would steal the bodies, imbue them with a mechanical simulation of life, feed them on substances containing neither salt, meat nor seasoning, and force them to work under their direction.

ere are other things still stranger for which I find no  
tion.

To study magic as a science you might read the fifteen volumes of Frazer, or Douté in the original, unless you wish to immure yourself in a Thibetan hermitage, or a Zawia dedicated to Ilm el Issm—the Learning of the Hundred Names of God. But if you want to see the results of what is more easily attributable to magic than to auto-suggestion, or any other influence, Haiti will do well enough. But you must leave Port-au-Prince for the mountains, where the negroes talk familiarly of ghosts, werewolves and vampires. And you must leave behind that portion of yourself which can *not* believe in anything beyond the limited dimension represented by capital cities, steam transport and Progress.

My own initiation into Voodoo resulted from my friendship with Françoise. She had interested me in Lyons because she was so unlike anything else in the city, or in France, for that matter. In Haiti she became a habit. I used to ride out most afternoons to the caille<sup>1</sup> under the banana tree and sit on a palm-leaf mat while Françoise sang, smoked, or did nothing at all. And in her white shift, intrigued me more than ever because she was so like everybody else. Yet there was *something*—I sought to determine the difference between Françoise, magnificently doing nothing, and all the other women similarly employed, and I failed.

Françoise wore ear-rings and a bright bandana, crude purple, orange, or red. She had a man, a stalwart young negro, broad of shoulder, lean of hip, who worked for a farmer in the valley. I thought she treated him as if he also were a decoration added negligently to her person, but I never understood Françoise.

Beside the room she lived in was a chapel dedicated to Voodoo. In it, a crucifix and a rudely carved serpent shared the altar. There were a number of other symbols, including two Ouanga bags sewn with feathers and the

<sup>1</sup> Hut.

usual offerings of food and drink. A tiny flame flickered in a coconut shell filled with oil.

Françine could make charms. With gold, silver, lead, iron and bronze, thunderstone, sandstone, logwood gum and ashes, a cross, a needle and a human hair, the pupil of an eye and the last notch of a serpent's tail, she could protect from every form of evil. With the heart of a bird, blood, semen and pollen enclosed in the scrotum of a he-goat, she could bring love to the most obdurate. With snake bones, lizard jaws, bat and frog bones, the feathers of a black hen, the wool of a black lamb, the heart of a dove, a moleskin, candy made of liver and brown sugar, a clay image smeared with sulphur, salt and alum and a mixture of vegetable poisons, she could ensure death. Perhaps the poisons would have achieved the desired result without the other ingredients.

All this is just to explain why Françine had influence with the papalois and mamalois, priests and priestesses of Voodoo and with those more illusive personages who dealt with spirits and demons, with the old gods of the Congo, <sup>a</sup>with Beelzebub, Agrippa, Ashtaroth and Melchior. So she took me one evening to a Houmfort, a Voodoo temple, <sup>t</sup>where I saw most of the rites I'd read about, and realised <sup>r</sup>how impossible they are to describe. For there is something rather ludicrous about an elderly negress in a red robe spinning round and round in front of an altar laden with alcohol, fruits, meat and sweet cakes. There is certainly nothing orgiastic about a chorus of middle-aged women in starched white overalls with spotless turbans on their heads. They look like respectable nurses or cooks, especially if they haven't been able to resist a few frills. Hens, turkeys and goats suggest a farmyard rather than a temple. A bull with lighted candles attached to the horns and a gold-embroidered cloth across the shoulders introduces a note of festival and one is inclined to laugh at the pomposity of the youths in attendance upon it. But the combination of all these elements furnishes a spectacle neither ridiculous, nor respectable, nor gay. The mamaloi in the red robe seizes

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after bird, swings it above her while she dances and y tears off its head. By the time she's dealt with a en hens and half as many vigorous turkeys, she is half ented and covered with blood. The papaloi kills the with a sword thrust into its heart and all the congrega- n drink the blood which gushes as if from a tap, filling ooden bowls which are passed from hand to hand. Calling upon the gods of the elements, Damballa Oueddo, the Serpent, Agoné, Master of the Sea, Loco, Lord of the Trees, Ogoun Badgris, the Dreadful One whose voice is thunder, and the gentle Maîtresse Ezilée, prototype of the Virgin Mary, the papaloi and his acolytes sprinkle the congregation from a huge trough filled with blood. Soon their white robes are splashed and running with scarlet. So far the scene is not particularly impressive, but after this purging by the blood of sacrifice, there is a pause.

Imagine the rough walled hut lit only by the flames burning in coconut shells, the bodies of birds and animals thrown aside, the smell of blood and of hot human flesh, the hard-held breath of the congregation waiting for a sign. For the gods must proclaim their acceptance of the oblations. Listen to the throb and beat of the rada drums which tear the heart out of the earth and set it beating. Feel the stillness of the blood-drenched crowd who, a moment ago, had been thrusting and screaming round the trough. The tension is unendurable. If the lois<sup>1</sup> do not descend, if they do not enter the body of anyone present, it means the gods refuse to be propitiated.

Crouching with the rest, I waited. My clothes were similarly stained, my nostrils widened by the stench. I could feel my heart hammering with the rada drums. The monotony of them and the terror of waiting had got hold of me. . . . My body shook and quivered. I could no longer control it. In common with all the black figures round me, I felt as if I were being beaten into the earth. Invisible feet tramped over me. Invisible hands assailed me. I looked around for Françoise who had been imperturbable

<sup>1</sup> Spirits.

even while she drank blood. She had treated the bowl as carelessly as the strings of the hybrid instrument with which she'd made music at Lyons, but I couldn't see her.

The lois were slow in coming. Unappeased, the gods refused communion. Perhaps they objected to a white. Heads swung backwards. Eyes rolled in my direction.

Then from the crowd a figure rose as if it had been propelled by some force beyond its own. A scream so shrill that it seemed to come from another dimension, broke from its lips. With head flattened between the shoulder-blades, so that the face stared upwards, a dish in which the eyes drifted, it danced. I can't describe it.

The incredible figure, leaping, swirling, wrung by ecstasy or agony, bent as a bow so that hair and knees touched, straightening with those wild cries that splintered all sensation of reality, was Françoise. For a moment she danced alone. Then the whole crowd were on their feet. Rapture filled their eyes, inverted so that they looked up and back. With arms hanging and shoulders loose they flung themselves into the dance. By this time, dust and smoke of burning herbs made a fog in the room. The crowd, swirling and threshing in the semi-darkness, was a river in flood. On the swift current of their emotions, men and women were flung into each other's arms. Shifts were torn, flesh bruised and bleeding. Beside me, a girl whose shirt, pointed breasts broke through her overall, arched her back against the wall, tendering lips and body to an invader.

The frenzy of the dance increased. Posture was an offer. Maddened by rum and cane spirit, maddened by sex and religion, the crowd abandoned themselves to an exultation at once savage and mystic. But they remained themselves. I mean that they provided their own impetus.

Only Françoise was possessed in the true sense of the word. She knew nothing of her surroundings. Illumination had descended on her. In its light she moved, blind and deaf, the breath scarcely parting her lips, her pulses still. A voice unlike her own issued from her mouth. In ultimate





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and overwhelming ecstasy, dominated by the invisible flame, she danced before the altar of her god.

The repetition of a phenomenon common to all faiths, from time immemorial, came to an abrupt end. With a shriek that wrung whatever is most sentient in our beings, Françoise dropped on her face. The papaloi bent over her with a gourd full of blood. "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sanctus. Amen," he muttered, and I wondered if I'd heard right.

On another and a quite different occasion, for the Voodoo religion must not be confused with the witchcraft of the mountains, I made a journey with Françoise. Far up in the hills, beyond the gorges which, from the aeroplane, had looked like shadows, an isolated community had been struck with sickness. It was necessary to propitiate Ogoun Badgris, to whom apparently all the worst evils can be traced. No ordinary ceremony would suffice. A heart wrenched from a living body, especially if it were a human body, had been known to work marvels. Was there not the story of President Antoine Simona's daughter who'd had the heart cut from one of the black Guards? Françoise showed impatience of such threadbare tales. She walked quickly ahead of me, bare-footed, with a patched shift moulded to her body and a band of raw sisal round her head. Both indicated penance, and every woman present at the ritual wore the same lopsided garments, with vast irregular pieces of coloured stuff applied to the white.

Françoise's village was at the edge of the sugar-cane. From a rise behind it one could see the shore, blinding white, with palms making a great fuss in the wind. But we went a long way into the jungle which sprawls to the edge of the cultivated ground. They wouldn't let me ride a donkey. So all day I trudged behind Françoise, with monstrous growths shutting out the sun and tangled things about my feet. Creatures slithered into pools of slime. An obscene plant with tendrils that looked like flesh, writhed about the tree-trunks. We passed along the edges of ravines so deep that I couldn't see the bottom. We



looked up at the scarred peaks 9,000 feet above us, and towards evening, having eaten nothing but cold plantain, we were aware of others climbing in front or behind us. But no greetings passed.

In the shelter of a rock, Francine sat down to wait. "For whom?" I asked.

"For the moon."

I think I slept. The next thing I remember was Francine shaking my shoulder. She had smeared some amber powder or pollen on her cheek-bones and a tiny red bag hung round her neck. She offered me a duplicate. Gravely I accepted it, and with the things dangling against our chests we hurried on and up. All day I had been conscious of the rada drums. They had been calling insistently, "father," "mother" and "little one," for they are of three sizes and each sounds a different note. The boom of them had filled the air, all round us, yet far away. Unhurried, relentless, primitive, with a savagery that was wholly indifferent, they demanded something they knew they would receive. As we clambered up the gorge, I felt the incessant throbbing as a part of myself.

Within a semi-circle of rocks, we came to a cleared space. The moonlight poured into it, so that I could see almost as clearly as if it had been day. And the thing happened within thirty feet of me. There were no accessories. Against the rocks crouched a number of men wearing sacks, with holes cut for the neck and arms. The women, seated by themselves, wore the parti-coloured garments I've described. There may have been fifty or sixty, all told. In the centre of the cleared space, there was a cabalistic design, flanked by skulls. Four mounds of sand indicated the points of the compass. Within a circle, squatted a tremendously powerful negro entirely naked. On either side of him stood a youth with a palm-leaf fan.

While we waited, I not knowing what we were going to see, the drums changed their measure. A motif struggled through the reiterated booming. At first it was an under-current of sound, but it swelled and swelled until it

suggested flood-tide. I felt I was being swept away by it, and was startled to see the rows of figures still motionless by the rocks. The women began to chant. In childish words, they told how afraid they were of Ogoun Badgris and how they wished for his help. It was so easy for him to destroy. Would he not turn away from his anger and be merciful?

Into the cleared space came an old man, more brown than black, his chest bare under a tattered European coat, a skirt ballooning round his legs. On his head was a red turban. He was just an ordinary old man, with eyeballs swimming in a pouched network of flesh. His ludicrously incongruous garments should have roused laughter, but I had no desire to laugh. A thrill of fear crept up my spine, for the old man had appeared so silently that I had not noticed his presence until he was standing in front of the naked negro with a sword in his hand. The chant broke in the middle of a line. The old man spoke direct to the gods. He said he was neither male nor female, but an instrument through which the divine will should be made apparent.

The drums were hushed. From them came the murmur of a heart beating. Or perhaps it was only an echo. The big negro, who had not yet moved, bent his head. The sword swung high and fell upon his neck. It must have been very sharp, for the head dropped as if it were a fruit. The old man picked it up and held it so that the blood from the severed arteries ran down his chest and on to the skirt, which was more horrible than ridiculous. Meanwhile the boys were busy fanning the truncated neck. Françoise explained afterwards that no dirt must be allowed to pollute it. If a fly settled, the head could not be replaced.

Not at all sure that I'd seen an execution, for the body did not move, I blinked and stared at the assembly, equally motionless. In the moonlight their crazy garments were divided into light and shade. The patches had become stains. Their skins looked as if they'd been oiled. Brown, black, pewter-grey, they had all acquired an underlying similarity, for they were facing terror.

Negro spines must be double-jointed, I thought, for the

dark heads were bent so far backwards that they looked like trays. On these the lips and nostrils protruded as hummocks. The eyes were brimming saucers.

With difficulty, I forced myself to look at the corpse. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps it would have disappeared. Perhaps it had never happened. But there was the body, crouched on its haunches, just as if it were alive, with the hands resting on the ground, palms upwards. And there was the old man bending forward with the head held at arm's length. At the exact moment when he replaced it on the neck, from which blood had been spurting over the trunk, the patched company let forth a shriek that deprived me of my last vestige of common sense. After that, I wasn't capable of judging what happened, but I saw the old man stand with his arms raised in supplication. I saw the sword laid on the naked negro's shoulders and a strip of red stuff lowered across his face. For a moment the youths hid him from my sight. Then he was on his feet.

I couldn't believe it, but I saw him moving, a little stiffly, round the circle. Men and women pushed towards him, dabbing their fingers in the blood which soaked his chest. With it they made the sign of the cross on brow and lips. The negro's steps quickened. His feet seemed to be running away with him. Soon he was dancing and the people singing a glad song for, by restoring life, Ogoun Badgris had signified his acceptance of the sacrifice.

Strutting like a cock, making play with his muscles, proclaiming his sex and his joy of life, the negro paused in front of me. Determinedly I touched his chest and smeared the blood on my shirt cuff.

By noon next day I was back in Françoise's hut. Millet and chicken were simmering in the pot. But my cuff still bore a red finger-mark. I turned it this way and that. "Did it really happen?" I asked Françoise.

"You saw it happen," she replied.

"That's not the same thing."

"It is enough."

I never knew whether Françoise believed in the mysteries

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which she revealed to me. Her attitude proclaimed the onlooker rather than the initiate. But then I've only once seen Françoise as an ordinary human being. It happened during a Congo sex dance, by which several villages celebrated a Christian festival.

I suppose everyone who has been to Haiti has seen "la danse Conge" and listened to the women chanting: "Better have a man in your house than live with Maman oh! Yes, little maid!" To which the men reply: "Go! Do my bidding. Bring me the blade of a knife. Bring me a fish-head and something strong to drink." (Or "a good casava cake.")

Well, there they all were, negroes, negresses, mulattoes, every shade of black and brown, moving bonelessly on the smooth red earth. Torches flared in front of the huts. The shadows leaped and twisted as if they were alive.

The "Chaca," mistress of the ceremonies, shook her rattle as she danced, alone, her face thrown back, her eyes narrowed. She used her body as a shuttle, weaving a tapestry of movement.

A man sprang into the centre of the square and began posturing in front of her. Without moving his feet, he simulated every phase and variation of the sexual act. At intervals, he leaped into the air with the force and grace of a Nijinsky. Then, while the woman undulated towards him, alternately offering and refusing, the man began a series of rhythmic movements, primitive and virile. He was a peacock showing off his fine feathers, a rooster strutting after a hen, an animal in rut.

One by one, other couples danced in the light of the torches. I recognised Françoise's negro, a muscular creature, slender waisted, wearing a pair of old cotton trousers, his bullet head shining with oil. In front of him a girl, sharp-breasted, with flowers on her head, shook her buttocks and cork-screwed her stomach in the fashion of the *danse du ventre*. Advancing and retreating, their bodies touched, hesitated, drew apart. I imagined waves licking at the shingle.

And as the throng increased, the men sang about the curse of woman which would deprive them of their strength. With mock shudders, they covered their faces and wailed that they were already exhausted. Upon which the women advanced with a proud display of breast and thigh, shrilling in high, menacing tones, "Coiyou ! Coiyou !" which is an old African word connected with a female in heat. "We will wear you out ! We will destroy you !" shrieked the women, insistent in their demands.

I looked at Françoise's negro. He was smiling and the girl was very close to him, her chin back, her lips straining.

Then, with the flurry of a hawk striking, Françoise had precipitated herself between them. With an admirable gesture, she ripped the girl's blouse, but that was only the beginning. While her rival twisted and squealed, making ineffective attempts to retaliate, Françoise set to work to claw out her eyes. Nobody interfered.

The negro stood there, smiling foolishly, with drops of moisture pearling on his great chest. Françoise's nails secured a hold. Blood streamed down the cheeks of her rival. With a yell, the girl bent, butted straight into her assailant's chest and fixed her teeth in the flesh. Françoise made no sound, but every line of her expressed the intent to kill. She got hold of the girl's hair and wrenched her head back. If she'd had a knife, she'd have stuck it into the bared throat. As it was, her nails came into play.

With her rival on the ground, Françoise began dancing as if nothing had happened. Her smile mocked the young buck who shuffled in front of her. A minute or two later they'd disappeared.

They must have lain that night in the forest, for when I returned to the hut under the banana tree, I found it empty. Arranging myself on the mat, I thought of all the things I would say to Françoise in the morning.

The next second, so it seemed to me, I was awakened by somebody singing. Startled to find it broad daylight, I looked out of the hut. Françoise was seated on a log with the stringed instrument on her knees. Casually she touched

it. In a rough voice, she crooned a song I'd heard in Lyons.

When I emerged, ruffled and cross, she didn't concern herself by so much as a glance in my direction. Without expression, her eyes half closed, she drifted from one song to another.

Later in the morning, we ate cakes made of millet and plantain, after which Franine went to sleep. Her head rested in the crook of an elbow. She relaxed as if she hadn't a thought in the world.

Before leaving, with Bonaparte, whose affections I now shared with an engaging donkey, for which I'd paid, but which never doubted that it belonged to the smiling negro, I looked into the Voodoo room. On the altar, between charms and the symbols of several different religions, lay the hybrid instrument. Beside it was a tooth.

It looked to me a singularly fresh tooth. I wondered if Franine had knocked it out of her rival's mouth.

## JOAN OF ARC IN TURKEY

### *Old and New Turkey*

ROUF BEY was giving a "raki" party in Angora. A stalwart man who hankered after a palm garden on the Tigris, he'd arranged his house in the capital so that it should look as much like a tent as possible. Carpets from Persia and Central Asia covered the floors and hung, between gold-hilted weapons, upon the walls. The furniture of the reception-room could have been packed on camels and transported across a desert march to be set up again at night in camp. It consisted of a few light and hard divans with some tables dwarfed by the size of water-pipes and bottles.

The invitations had mentioned six thirty, the traditional moment at which modern Turkey turns to the west, not for the fourth of the day's prayers, but for cocktails.

Rouf Bey had no use for a mixed drinks and little, I think, for the mixture of the sexes ordained by the Ghazi, who imagined that if men and women could be induced to dance together, each twist of their hips would signify progress. So the regimented bottles, flanked by olives and cheese, contained araki, a spirit clear as water and potent as the last of the ukase.

When the dinner was announced the company had split into two. The women, relieved for once from the burden of would-be saffron, sat upright upon these instruments of torture known to the single as chairs, secluded themselves in a corner. With their feet tucked under them and their shoulders bent, they ignored the presence of the opposite sex and the

impingement of a century which had stuffed their heads at the expense of their pockets.

The men withdrew. Presenting the solid rampart of their backs, fortified by their united intention, they succeeded in isolating themselves as successfully as if the walls of the selamlık guarded their discussion of Ismet Pasha's Finance Bill.

The gurgle of water-pipes provided a pleasant accompaniment to conversation. Smoke thickened the air. With a glass in my hand, I found myself seated on a carpeted step, leaning against the knees of a heavy-browed young woman of twenty-two who had recently taken a degree. Her eyes held more uncertainty than content. Enormously large and surrounded by stiff, straight lashes, they justified the term liquid, but when their owner brooded, with lips thrust out and chin hanging, they resembled nothing so much as saucers filled with hot chocolate.

"What are you going to do after you leave college?" I asked, by way of relieving the Stygian atmosphere.

"I don't know," replied the girl without moving. Her skin needed the bright colours of her grandmother's silks and embroideries. The indefinite blue, supposed to be popular in Paris, gave neither value nor consistency to the flesh tones darkening from olive to earthen. Only her teeth, square, strong and unexpectedly white, offered the necessary contrast.

Urged to further consideration, she added, "Well, I'm ambitious, so I suppose, if I get a good offer, I shall marry."

Beside me on the floor sat a different type of young person. Her angles were much more acute. Unfortunately, pimples thickened her skin, but her hair grew splendidly about a brow corrugated with faint lines. She must have been still in her teens, but she'd thought too much. I couldn't imagine her lips intimate with laughter. When she spoke, it was as if she groped to express a meaning that eluded her, yet her words were simple. "I think most girls want a husband and a house of their own, but they'd like to have a good education first."



"And you?" I insisted.

"I don't want to marry. I'm much freer as I am. When I ask my father if I can do something, he always says 'yes,' but if I were married, I'd have to obey a husband who mightn't be so indulgent."

From the divan above me came a voice, different in quality. It held the reserve and the detachment of an earlier generation, yet it suggested a more suitable weapon for dealing with life than the portentousness of the younger women. "We really had much more freedom in the old days," it said so lightly that I thought of freshly whipped cream. "Nobody knew what we were doing. The yashmak reduced us all to the same pattern. When we put on our charchafs we disappeared from public view. Nobody could criticise. Imagine! Behind her veil every woman occupied a world of her own. Oh, the delight of it! The security, or the adventure!" The speaker leaned forward with the grace belonging to the unquestioned. Her hair was badly dyed. It ranged from yellowish grey to an angry corn colour, but its abundance shadowed a delicate and amusing face which would have looked charming in the ample muslins of the harem.

"Mother, what are you saying?" reproved the daughter who'd taken a degree.

"But it's true, Mahmoudé, child. And besides in those days everything was easy. We had plenty of money. We had houses instead of these dreadful flats, slaves instead of clumsy servants who know nothing at all." Then she said something which for me epitomised the difference between old and new Turkey. "In the harem we were all different. We had time to think and to grow. Now you children are alike as sweets on a tray. There is nothing to choose between you, squeezed out of a tube into the same shape. Often I cannot tell whether it is my own daughter, or my sister's child, or Nakhilé the lawyer, or Arzié Ablá who is talking."

For a moment it seemed as if the conversation might develop on lines familiar to modern Russians who delight

in psycho-analysis, but the impetus failed. The Turkish girls regarded themselves from a practical and already slightly embittered point of view. They preferred their cigarettes, long and unscented, to the water-pipe. They were not addicted to cocktails, but still less did they like the araki with which they were obliged to relieve their thirst. Depressed or elated by the raw spirit, while conscious of its impropriety in the setting they sought to impose upon their lives, they fancied themselves giving vent to thoughts beyond their control. They were in revolt, but against what they didn't know. It had been so much easier when the veil was their only enemy. Now the opposing forces ranged from man as a rival, if not a master, to the vast network of civilisation which offers insufficient scope for the worker with education and nothing else.

By this time I saw the room through a thick blue haze. The backs of the men formed a bulwark without loophole for assault. The colours of the Shirazi carpets blurred. I thought, if there isn't any air soon I shall cease to exist. My hand holding the stem of a water-pipe seemed to be a long way off. I doubted if I could raise it to my mouth. Hastily, I looked at the nearest faces, concentrating on their features, as if they were steps by which I could climb to consciousness. I imagine somebody must have opened a window, or perhaps a newcomer paused on the threshold, letting in the sharp air of the hills, for suddenly the room refocused. And round me, I heard fresh and characterless voices speaking of religion. Since alcohol is forbidden to Moslems, the circumstances appealed to me. To encourage the discussion, I asked a woman sucking rose-leaf jam out of a heavily carved spoon, whether the claims of nationalism had effectively routed those of Islam in the new capital. And I remembered that one of the uncompromising male backs had represented Turkey at the Moslem Conference in Mecca in a bowler hat and tweeds. He had been less concerned with the vengeance of heaven for such a slight than with the possibility of getting apoplexy in a climate which, he opined, might be holy, but was certainly uncivilised.

"Among the men, yes," replied two or three voices, and they spoke of a separate order, for though boys and girls work side by side at their desks, they haven't yet learned to play together.

"What about the women?" I asked.

"For us it is different," returned a middle-aged lady, granddaughter of a famous Hodja<sup>1</sup> who had been known to read the Koran without pause from sunset to dawn, while struggling with afrits<sup>2</sup> for the possession of a sick man's body. "Freedom is taking our children from us. We must rely on another life for what we lose in this."

One of her daughters, a doctor with a practice confined to her own sex, interpolated, "There must be something in religion, but we are too busy to trouble about the future. There is such a lot to be done for Turkey—now at the moment. Later, there may be time. . . ." The dark young creature, with a frown between her brows, displayed more energy than her contemporaries, but, like them, she left a number of her sentences unfinished.

The woman who'd been eating jam looked up, licking her lips. "I was the first to ask Halidé Edib whether she worked for Islam or for Turkey," she said, and it seemed to me that she put a match to straw. I saw the sparks reflected in eyes accustomed to patience and in others, younger, where resentment struggled with frustration. Figures stirred and straightened. The group rearranged itself. "Ah, Halidé!" said someone. Half a dozen voices broke into speech and the sentences no longer reminded me of worsted unravelled. Hard and purposeful, they told of the woman who'd played Joan of Arc to Kemal's version of the Dauphin.

So, not for the first time, I heard truth and fable linked about the name of Halidé.

The room acquired new dimensions. The colours deepened. Shadows in the corners became the advance guard of an army. A curtain swelled into the sail of a dhow slipping across the Bosphorus, her cargo a fugitive with a

<sup>1</sup> Holy man.

<sup>2</sup> Demons.

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price on her head. The years parted like threads hanging from a loom. War rent the land, that new republic which Kemal carved out of a dusty Asian range, conjuring rifles from the sand and an army out of rocks.

Legend blazed the trail of Halidé. She'd been the very spirit of the Turkish revolution. She'd played Joan to a nation struggling in chaos, and like her French prototype, she'd been mercilessly betrayed. Brought up in the harem, her first activities had been limited by bars and the veil. But with the tyranny of Abdul Hamid at its height, Halidé had broken every tradition of her caste. She had worked in secret for the Committee of Union and Progress, destined to overthrow the last Ottoman Sultan. Later she became one of its most active members. In company of suspects—chiefly intellectuals from the University—she preached freedom of speech and movement to a crowd which overflowed the meeting-place and spread into the street. The police intervened. Shapeless and nameless under a hastily assumed charchaf, Halidé escaped. Similarly protected, she carried messages under the noses of the Allies who, for their own ends, propped the crumbling dignity of Abdul Hamid. But she flung back her veil when she addressed revolutionary meetings in attics and alleys, so that her face became known to the military police. After a narrow escape from the Sultan's executioner, she found herself threatened by a British warrant. So, to escape prison, Halidé, still in her twenties, branded as revolutionary and spy, threw herself into the Bosphorus, with the intention of swimming to the Asian coast, so that she might join the then General Kemal. Fortunately she was picked up by a fishing-boat, half-drowned, wholly exhausted, and landed in an Anatolian cove. By that time the Treaty of Sèvres had convinced the Turks they could hope for nothing from Europe. The Ghazi was preparing for his historic advance against 100,000 Greeks, fresh troops offered by Venezuelos to Lloyd George in return for concessions in Asia Minor.

So far the recital had been general. When one imagination failed, another filled in the gaps. But now the woman

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

with the dyed hair, mother of three daughters with professions, took up the tale, and in her light voice carried it to a triumphant conclusion.

Halidé had discarded her veil at the head of a Turkish battalion. During the whole of the campaign, she'd lived and fought as a trooper.

In those wild days, Kemal armed his regiments with his own enthusiasm. At his command peasants who knew nothing of war, became soldiers fighting with stones when ammunition failed. It was an epoch of makeshifts and savage determination. The republic struggled out of the womb of the old Turkish Empire.

Halidé, unafraid in the face of Versailles, acquired considerable influence over the Ghazi. He regarded her as his luck and would not launch an attack unless she were present. It was she who insisted on Smyrna as the impossible, but at the same time the inevitable goal. When the city fell and the Greek quarter burst into flames, a girl, bare-headed, smoke-grimed, was the first to bring the news to Kemal, as she'd been the first to carry his despatches across hostile country. No wonder she won from him a promise that the women of Turkey should be free. "The equal of men," she said, having done a man's job.

So Halidé Edib, first Minister of Education in Angora, liberated her compatriots from the veil. Simultaneously, she condemned them to work, and, like all prophets in advance of their time, she paid for her audacity.

The casual voice which made a soufflé of its words, ran up and up the scale, till the end of the story had the rhythm of a song. Republican women walk in the streets, uncomfortable in their hats, a trifle mistrustful of men's gaze, disturbed perhaps by its lack of interest, because, according to Abdullah, Emir of Trans-Jordan, "without mystery there can be no desire." But Halidé is in exile. She who fought the tyranny of a Sultan, found herself in violent opposition to the dictatorship created by Turkey's first president. When the heads of old friends began to fall and her own, perhaps, seemed a trifle unsteady on its long neck, she protested for

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the last time and was allowed to escape. This last and bitterest of her flights took her to America.

It seemed a long way off. I understood the finality in the women's minds. America to them represented a dimension infinitely remote, in spite of Roberts College and their disillusioning education. In America perhaps there was no difference between men and women. The earnest and ineffective girls beside me dreamed of a future in which erudition should play the part of housemaid, sweeping into a bright new dust-pan the litter of inherited prejudices, which impeded their progress. Their elders regretted the past.

The next time I heard of Halidé was in an apartment on Fourth Avenue. It belonged to an American millionaire, one of the three completely happy people I've met. The others were a Bedouin who owned nothing but a prayer carpet, and a melon-seller in Tunisia. The American owned a vast amount, but his possessions were never permanent. One day he might buy a collection of modern pictures and a block of flats in which to house it. A week later, he would invite his friends to lunch and present them with as many pictures as they chose to remove. Within a month, his walls might be covered with carpets, or the most frightful frescoes perpetrated by a protégée. He sheltered innumerable waifs from lands torn by various forms of revolution. They drove his fleet of cars at a desperate pace against all the signal lights of New York, charging one-way streets as they would a hostile tribe. They pursued the education for which their patron paid with a frenzy unjustified by results. As soon as they had achieved a passable imitation of culture, they departed, to all appearances, as dumb as when they arrived. Most of them ended their careers upon a gallows, or in front of a firing squad, for east of the Adriatic, the terms "patriot" and "revolutionary" are synonymous.

I remember the occasion on which Halidé's name dominated the conversation. Ruth Draper had been laughing at Professor Péliot's story of the Boston youth who

interrupted a lecture on Eastern religions to ask if Christianity had reached China at the end of the sixth century B.C. or A.D. Anna Pavlova sat delicately upon a sofa. Like a humming-bird, she moved as if she had no feet. H. G. Wells talked about himself. Simultaneously a hollow personage, overweighted by his turban, talked, with even more assurance, about Persian metaphysics. I think a Senator, an Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, who in later years said he felt like God when at precisely ten thirty every morning he fixed the price of gold, and the financier known as "the Eagle of Wall Street" were also present. Our host, whose collections of people were always more interesting than his careless aggregations of objets d'art, had been, as usual, silent. In fact he'd read a book while a future president argued with a deposed king concerning the merits of haggis which both confused with porridge.

When a Levantine brought coffee—Turkish coffee—in a beaker quite possibly made in Birmingham for the Indian market, he showed me the frontispiece. It represented a young woman in uniform with a veil over her head and the bridle of a troop horse in her hand. "That is Halidé Khanoum," he said. "Those are her sons. . . ." He gestured with his chin, round, soft and covered with white stubble, towards the end of the table where two schoolboys sat between a Syrian politician fugitive from prison and an eminent British general.

After that day I became familiar with Halidé through the conversation of Turks driven to the colleges of New York to slake a thirst surpassing that of a Bedouin lost in a waterless desert. But months passed before Turkey's Pucelle, Kemal's exiled Egeria, came to see me in London.

By that time, of course, Constantinople had become used to hats in the streets and to the annual typists' ball, where modernity is measured by the stiffness of permanent waves and the lack of material in a skirt. Unveiled women no longer threw themselves from one love affair into another and finally into the Bosphorus, but they were up against the labour problem.

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"They want more than men can afford to give," I said to Halidé, while I looked at her and wondered how she had found strength to do a hundredth part of that with which she was credited. For I remember her as fragile. A small slip of a creature with a sturdy strength of shoulder and eyes that took away one's breath. For the rest, she gave me an impression of brownness. The clear pale brown of her skin drifted into the stronger browns of her hair, and this hair stood out boldly. It overwhelmed the delicate cheeks, fell across the brow and flared from the head like a thicket. That day I saw Halidé oppressed by the weight of her hair and lit by her great eyes. Her lips were sweet and robbed of colour by the exhaustion which weighted her lids and wrought shadows under them, but her lips also were heavy, like fruit. They contrasted with the distinction and simplicity of her face when she thrust back her hair as if she were always at war with it.

Sunk in a big chair, she talked of Turkey. Her voice was emphatic. It held in it the suggestion of oratory as a physical pleasure. It dominated the room, but without undue insistence. And when it spoke of the past, of the old Turkey, in which Halidé had been brought up, it acquired a tenderness most women keep for their lovers.

In Angora, as in the States, I'd heard a good deal of argument with regard to Halidé's motives. Had she fought for Islam or for progress, for the rights of women, for love of a great man with the world against him, for a nation, or for her own ambitions? But as soon as I heard her talk of her grandmother and of her childhood in the house on a hill at Beshisktach overlooking the Sea of Marmora, I knew that Halidé's allegiance was to Turkey. She loved the land and the ordinary people, the school children, the porters and the peasants, the old men hankering after their fezes, the humble women who had been slaves, or the daughters of slaves.

I incited her to talk about the past which still belonged to her as a private possession. So, after a while, I saw Halidé not



as a soldier, or school teacher, or Minister, not even as a desperado, plotting against one Government, escaping from another, but as a child and a young girl. I saw her after the death of her mother who'd made her last journey in a yellow litter and been bled by crabs to cure her consumption—a dark, indignant mite screaming for her father who belonged to the household of the Sultan, Abdul Hamid. Screaming so lustily that after the neighbours had poured buckets of water over her for fear she should burst, a Circassian boy had been forced to carry her at midnight through the guarded streets of Yildiz. No one could pass the palace gates. Soldiers barred the way with bayonets. But the Circassian showed the child, her face swollen, her breath still coming in gulps. "It is Edib Bey's daughter. She will die of crying if I cannot bring her to her father."

So the gigantic portals opened. Endless corridors led to a room where the Grand Vizier slept under a yellow quilt. A fat man with a colossal head, he sat blinking at the light, while the child stared at the colour she hated because it reminded her of death and hardly noticed her father lying on the opposite couch.

Halidé seems to have done a good deal of screaming. Her temper admitted of no obstacles. When her milk-mother, a black slave, in whose house she was to spend Ramazan, hired a Kurdish porter to carry her charge from Merjan to Suleymanié, the child's fury robbed her of speech. She would have walked her feet to ribbons rather than submit to such indignity. The Kurd patted her cheeks and offered to buy her sweets out of his own poor purse, and the mite in his arms, sickened by touch and smell, nourished such hatred that she remembered it all her life.

When a servant laughed at a dog half buried under a crumbling wall, the schoolgirl, accustomed to kneeling on a cushion in front of her master, learning to read from a Koran whose Arabic she couldn't understand, would have put a knife into the man, had she found one within reach.

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Years later, at Galata station—it being then 1916—the young woman, famous as a writer and an educationalist, attacked with her bare hands an Austrian who would have stripped her in front of a man, to see if she had gold hidden in her clothes. And such was her fury that she didn't know what she'd done until she found herself surrounded by policemen. In a mirror, Halidé caught sight of her face and was frightened by its ferocity. "I was crimson to the whites of my eyes and I seemed to look like an angry tiger." But she stood her ground at the police station, would sign nothing except what she wrote with her own hand, and ended by inducing an apology from officials dismayed by her reputation.

All Halidé's feelings seemed to have been equally strong. She adored her grandmother, a great lady who'd brought her husband a dower of goods and slaves and then squandered both their fortunes because she could resist neither giving nor buying. She loved her father and disapproved of him because he insisted on marrying two wives at the same time, despite the general feeling of his class against polygamy. And her aversion increased when the household was rent as much by the tears and the acid courtesy of the wives as by the quarrels of their servants.

She admired and married her mathematical teacher—"an intellectual aristocrat," who died in an asylum before he was sixty. And when she went to him in her teens, "no little Circassian slave bought in the market could have entered upon our common life in such an obedient spirit as I did."

But Halidé was no harem woman. Confined within the walls of an apartment on Sultan Tepi, she passed from one mental illness to another. The birth of her elder son saved her reason. The second brought her joy. But when Sahib Zeki Bey, contemporary of her father, a man who tried to live in two worlds, exhausting both his body and his brain, took a second wife, Halidé insisted on divorce. This was the beginning of her rebellion. Thereafter she led revolt wherever she found it.

As a writer, she supported the Constitution of 1908 and attacked the despotism of the Sultan whose police had chased her *caïque* when she'd visited an American yacht on the Bosphorus. As a teacher, she opposed the prejudices and traditions which limited feminine education. As a Nationalist, she was elected to the General Council of the Turk Ojak (the Turkish Hearth) which aimed at establishing equality and fraternity throughout the land. As a speaker, she denounced the endless party squabbles, the suspicions and the espionage which led to the first defeats of the Unionist and Young Turk Parties.

At that time, while Armenians were massacring Turks in Adana and Turks massacring Armenians in Eastern Anatolia and Bulgarians massacring Turks in the Balkans, bloodless revolutionaries crowded the streets of Constantinople, tears running down their cheeks, singing, "Oh country, Oh mother, be thou happy and joyful to-day!" A few months later, the counter-revolution broke out. The Young Turk leaders sought refuge in the Russian Embassy. Corpses filled the streets. Firing echoed from the distant hills. The mob ruled. In its train came anarchy, licence and insensate slaughter.

Halidé, proscribed by the reactionary government, sought by a number of even more vindictive enemies who saw in her a pioneer of the system they hated, fled to Egypt with her children. She had to cut off her hair and wear the clothes of a servant. With a negro prostitute who was kind to her, she travelled "as a black bundle" in a crowded second-class cabin, her possessions tied in a shawl and her sons wearing rags borrowed from the gardener.

"That was the first time," said Halidé. "Since then I've made a habit of escape. It's become natural to me. I must have fled at times from every port in Turkey, from the Sultan's spies and British patrols, from revolutions and rebels and fanatics, and at last from my own people." Her voice dropped. The resonance went out of it.

The small figure, crumpled and indifferent, twisted in its chair. The eyes blazed, so that I found myself staring at

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them and with them, into a distance, where I saw scenes familiar to their owner.

"The things I've seen," murmured Halidé.

Silence fell. I imagined it pressing upon the room like a blanket.

"In Angora," said Halidé so harshly that her voice cut strips from the blanket, "I saw a Turkish woman from Erzeroum. For seven years she'd been a refugee. She'd nothing at all except a torn chemise. Her face was seamed leather, her eyes blue flames. She told me how her children had been killed—slowly—and I cannot forget. I know a man, a member of the first National Assembly, who thought death too good for an Armenian because his wife and all the rest of his family had been butchered by these people. He had seen what was left of them and he saw it again whenever his lids closed.

"I know an Armenian without a tongue, who wanders about like an animal, making sounds that have no meaning. He is looking for his children who were shot. I know—oh, never mind what I know! It is too much."

I said something about the Turkish republic. It is not so small a thing to have been instrumental in creating a nation. But Halidé thrust at her stubborn hair. Her lips twisted, "I remember walking into a cave in Palestine," she said, "just a shepherd's cave. I thought the boy was asleep. A sheep or two, brown, you know, and long-tailed, wandered about outside. Then I saw his feet, raw, swollen—and where his face had been. . . ."

Deliberately, she rose and pulled down her coat, shaking the creases out of her skirt. "I'd dreamed of a nationalism which would create beauty, love and understanding. I've seen nothing but mutual massacre and mutual hatred."

She went to the window and stared, unseeing, at the trees. In the strong light she looked dusty. With her back turned, she said, "There was an Arab—he fought for you, I suppose—executed at Beirut. There were a lot of gallows in front of Government House. Figures swung from some

of them. A man walked about among the rest of the condemned. He spoke to them gaily and smoked a cigarette. When his turn came, he chose his own gallows and put the rope round his neck. He said: 'Born an Arab, I have served the Arabs, and I am dying for the Arabs.' What was the use of killing such a man?"

I didn't answer. I also had seen Arabs die. I'd seen Kurds hanged by order of Kemal and a very gallant Jew adjust the rope round his own neck while the President, who'd drunk with him at such parties as Rouf Bey's, watched from his palace window.

"I have seen all kinds of ideals used as instruments for creating human misery . . ." said Halidé quietly. She might have been a Russian—sated by the sufferings of her race. Her voice had in it the melancholy of Slavonic discussions and Turkish songs.

Then she turned from the window. With small, brisk movements she settled her clothes. An entirely different personality evolved in front of me. The figure lost its fluidity. The dreamer of dreams which had proved so disillusioning in their realisation disappeared. A calm, practical, and to a certain extent expressionless, person had taken her place. There was no longer any distinctive quality about the woman. Her shoes were American and her movements suggested the same origin. The habit of eagerness, so common in the States, sent her from one chair to another, collecting books, satchel and gloves.

Frowning so that her strongly marked brows seemed to be hooked together, she looked at the clock, then at me. "We've just time to get to that school before it closes. My lecture's not till six," said Halidé. She was very busy. As we left the house, she pulled a list from her bag and studied it while we walked down the street. "There are too many hours in England," she said with a brief smile, "and none at all in Turkey, but I think we got through more work there. I suppose there was more to be done."

I found myself hastening to keep up, not with her steps, but with the purpose she forced upon me. I could imagine

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her now in uniform, impatient, at the head of a troop. But I wondered if she held a rifle as carelessly as the satchel which, overfull, exuded papers. I stooped to retrieve a leaflet.

“Hurry!” exclaimed Halidé, and I thought the word sounded strange on the lips of a Turk.

## A FRENCHWOMAN IN LHASA

### *Thibet*

KAILANA in those days appeared to me as the end of the world. A rattling tonga, insecurely attached to a couple of ponies whose sole desire seemed to be to part company as quickly as possible, had brought us from the Doon valley. I don't remember how long it took. Probably, now, there is a motor road. But when I made the journey, long ago, the track twisted and doubled round the mountains as if it were not only an eel, but an eel mightily flustered and indignant. At one point, presumably low down, there were forests ablaze with flamboyant trees. The sand remains in my mind as being red, but as I also have a vague recollection of red monkeys swinging overhead, I feel that my memory cannot be very reliable.

Kailana must have been much like other hill-stations. It consisted of wooden bungalows strung along a ridge between barracks and polo ground. And apart from the soldiers it was inhabited by intolerant infants who had no difficulty in controlling any number of water-buffalo. These monstrous beasts, whose instinct is to occupy the whole of a khud path, could only be diverted from their purpose by a child, stark-naked, polished by the rain, brandishing a branch several times its own size, and the smaller the child, the more obedient were the animals.

The Himalayas dominated Kailana. Peak upon peak they rose, a blue-white palisade guarding the frontier of Thibet. When sunshine splintered on their glaciers, the reflection blinded, but the mountains themselves were accessible. In

the clear and colourless atmosphere, they acquired the familiarity of powdered sugar. One had only to stretch out and scoop a handful from the heaps so wantonly spilled. But generally the clouds mutilated the summits. Then the range, tearing itself free of the forest which clung to the lower slopes, became the advance guard of that host of demons, spirits and magicians whom the Thibetans propitiate.

For months, of course, it rained. The nearest hills were blotted out. Through blankets of water, seeing nothing, hearing only the rush of the downpour, we pushed our way on small drooping ponies which looked as if they were about to sink into the ground, or we were carried in litters, not unlike coffins slung on poles. When at last the rain paused and everything living sprang up, strong and scented, to greet the sun, we decided to go up into the mountains and try for an *Ovis ammon*. I may say at once that we spent three weeks in the snows hunting that wily sheep. I only caught one glimpse of it in a suitable position and that was when crawling round a rock, I came suddenly, face to face with the huge curling horns. Both of us were equally surprised. Unfortunately, the sheep acted quicker than I did. In every sense of the word, he kept his head.

At the time I was bitterly disappointed. I thought gloomily of frostbite and snow-blindness. I wondered if two feet were enough to walk on, or if they'd originally been intended for other less painful purposes. But now I remember that journey mainly because of the hermitage we saw one evening under the crest of a cyclopean pass.

The ground must have been sacred, for pilgrims had raised innumerable altars made of three standing stones with a fourth for a roof. Against a grey sky, threatening and oppressive, fluttered the rags and streamers with which Thibetans mark their holy places. As we climbed, our ponies clattering after us, the wind drove at us with the force of spears. We felt the iced metal against our chests. Looking up with bleared eyes, I saw the pass as a cable hung between two ranges. A cairn of stones formed a knot



in the rope, and the grey greasy slopes fell from it as if they were curtains. The path twisted, and straight above us we saw a darn in the mountain-side. Where a fold of rock protruded, a rough wall had been heaped together and roofed with thatch. Behind this shed-like structure, there must have been a cave. In front of it, a ledge offered just sufficient foothold for the figure which stood on it.

"A woman!" exclaimed one of the Englishmen and added an expletive, expressive of amazement.

The guide, a small stalwart person with Mongolian features who called himself a "dokpa," literally a dweller in the solitude, explained that the woman was a hermit and a great magician who had power over devils and over that half-world where the spirits wander between life and death. He said a great deal more about the supernatural attributes of the recluse. He described how she sat in one position "for months" meditating, and no speech came from her lips, and he made ready at once to present her with meal, butter and tea in return for a blessing.

Fortunately at that moment the woman seemed to have no desire to meditate. She advanced to the edge of the platform and looked down at us. Her appearance indicated no particular age. Her flat cheek-bones were well covered. A peaked woollen cap, the ear-flaps turned up and suggestive of horns, covered her head. A coarse and heavy robe of some dark stuff reached from her throat to her heels. Long sleeves fell from under it, hiding her hands. A rope marked the waist and added to the general effect of a bundle propped up on end. But the smooth, hairless face, unbroken, so far as I remember it, by the usual line of eyebrows, with a triangle of forehead visible under the cap, expressed the utmost assurance, or perhaps indifference. The eyes were brown pebbles and as emotionless as the surrounding stones graven with texts from Buddhist scriptures. Yet they held the peace that you see in the faces of nuns, cloistered not by impulse but by vocation. I think of that face as the quietest I've ever seen.

There seemed to be no path leading to the hermitage.

The woman dropped a vessel at the end of a rope. Our guide put his offering into it. A brief exchange of words followed. We passed on.

The recluse still stood at the extremity of the ledge from which she could see the track descending, but she did not turn to look at us. Her position had not altered when we crossed the pass. Eternity was at her disposal, the world as wide as her imagination.

At that time I knew nothing of the anchorites secluded in caves or cells above the snowline on isolated Thibetan peaks. Meditation as a life's business seemed to me not far removed from lunacy. I had never heard of "tuma" which generates heat in the naked hermit entombed beside a glacier, or of the esoteric learning by which the Thibetans annihilate space and divide the various substances of man, so that what we call spirits are temporarily delivered from their bodies. Yet I couldn't get the woman out of my mind. I thought of her imprisoned by the Himalayan winter, snow-bound on a few feet of rock. For interminable months she would not be able to leave her cave. In darkness and in silence, that terrible negation of sound which beats upon the ear-drums, she would crouch, motionless, in the seat of meditation. I imagined the "gomti," a square box some thirty inches in diameter in which the hermit sits cross-legged, a meditation rope passed under the knees and tied behind the neck to prevent any chance of reclining, or stretching, when half asleep. There would be nothing to drink, no heat, unless it could be self-engendered and for food only the remains of summer offerings. There were times when I pressed my hands to my eyes to obliterate the motionless figure in the heavy robe, and others when I felt I must travel several thousand miles to see her again.

Years later, I dined in Paris with the nephew of France's greatest colonial administrator, the Marshal Lyautey who made Morocco and incidentally refrained from turning bastard Arabs into passable imitations of Frenchmen. It was a between-trains affair, so we chose a restaurant on one of the big boulevards. I remember the varnished panelling,

the long high-backed seats, the brightness of the lights and the monotonous black of the women's dresses. For a time we talked of "our Sahara." I suppose we also ate prolifically and were satisfied.

While my host spoke to a waiter with that hushed intimacy which transforms the act of feeding into a ritual, I glanced at the other occupants of the alley formed by the tall seats. Across the bent and nondescript shoulders I found myself looking at a woman who at first sight appeared to be very much like her neighbours. She had a simple, direct and quite cheerful face. Her hair was piled on the top of her head under an apology for a hat. Her clothes were of solid black stuff. I couldn't think why she seemed familiar. Hoping to find a clue, I studied each of her companions in turn. A family party, I decided. Prosperous bourgeois, and the lean man, who looked as if he'd been wrung in a mangle, might be a professor. Now I came to think of it, there was a flavour of the Sorbonne about the woman. She had a teacher's mouth, firm, critical and detached.

I went on staring, but there was nothing to justify my interest. Rather fat, I thought, a full face, very smooth, no eyebrows to speak of, well, where *had* I seen the woman?

In due course she looked up, and as her eyes met mine, I thought "how quiet!" The adjectives I'd previously applied to her were as inadequate as a tape-measure among the stars. It seemed to me the Latin voices hushed. A chill spread over the restaurant. "Deadly quiet," I thought, still without remembering. "I couldn't bear to live with them."

Then my host spoke, "I've asked you twice what you're staring at?"

I expect I blinked as I turned to him. "The woman opposite. She looks so out of place."

"D'you mean Madame Neel?"

"Who is she?"

The young man exploded. My ignorance had just that effect on him, for I had no right to be so abysmally uninformed. I called myself a traveller and I'd never heard of Alexandra David Neel! The French language lends itself

admirably to such outbursts. Before I'd finished my first café filtre, I'd heard that beside Madame Neel's journey's, all other expeditions were of a laughability ! " But what would you, it is ridiculous to talk of anybody else with regard to Thibet——"

" That's it," I interrupted. " She has the eyes of a nun I saw, ages ago, in the Himalayas."

" Five times," repeated my host with formidable patience. " Five times, I tell you, has that woman penetrated into your forbidden land——" He gulped a cognac which deserved a better fate. " She slipped through the fingers of the English like—well," he smiled, " like the fleas in the seams of my breeches when I was campaigning in Africa. She went to Shigat-se and stayed with the mother of the Tashi Lama. She went to Lhasa. She lived there——" Momentarily, words failed him. Then they came in flood. I felt myself beaten down by them, clinging to the most effective as if they were straws. I don't think the young man cared much about the accuracy of his portraiture. He was interested only in its dimensions.

From his tapestry of phrases, I gained an impression which I had the greatest difficulty in fitting to the woman who sat squarely at the opposite table, a tooth-pick in her hand. The nail of her first finger was broken. I noticed it with relief while my host continued to weave spells.

Experienced story-tellers use words in different ways. The Englishman treats his with respect. He pays them the courtesy of selection. He is more interested in the meaning than in the sound. But when the Latin finds a subject which pleases him, he sprays it with words. They rush at it from all directions like the jets in a modern bath. In time the origin of the discussion is lost, but the words continue, fountains of them, with light caught in the spume.

Madame David Neel had studied oriental philosophy and comparative religions at the Sorbonne. Subsequently, she had become a Buddhist, and after holding a position as lecturer in a Belgian university, the French Ministry of Education had sent her to India and Burma. So far, the

narrator had, presumably, confined himself to facts, but he could not resist the chance to develop his theme. Soon I was being initiated into the "interminable spiritual calvary" which precedes a conversion and which, in the case of Madame Neel, preluded "a journey still more protracted and by paths wholly untrodden."

"Are you sure she's a Buddhist?" I interrupted.

"How could she not be?" Surprise turned another tap. Within a few minutes, the young man had started Madame Neel on an Eastern pilgrimage, destined to last fourteen years. According to him, she had been inspired by the mysticism which, from earliest ages, has prisoned intellectuals of different races within the walls of monasteries and hermitages. In Burmah she'd sought retreat among the Kamatongs, contemplative monks belonging to the most austere Buddhist sect. In Japan she'd secreted herself at Tofuku-ji, a monastery of the Zen sect, where ascetics devote night and day to the acquisition of abnormal powers. In Korea the mysterious Panyan "monastery of ineffable wisdom" had opened its doors to her. But always "the land of snows," Thibet with its monastic cities, its anchorites, its occultism and esoteric learning, had called to the adventurous mind of Alexandra. Wearing the woollen robe, the heavy black cloak and the cap with triple peaks peculiar to Thibetan recluses, she had arrived on foot at the cave of a "Jowo Gomchen," sky-bound at an altitude of 15,000 feet on the borders of Sikkim. How she induced this contemplative lama of the Red Hat sect to accept her as a pupil, my host did not attempt to explain. "The Red Hats are not celibates," he said, "but they are liable to spend half a life time in silent meditation, preferably in darkness."

There was no necessity to say more. My imagination substituted the Frenchwoman for the bolster-like figure I'd seen in the Himalayas. But the man beside me continued. For interminable winters, broken by the brief glory of mountain summers, during which the slopes burst into a blaze of azaleas and rhododendrons, Madame Neel had lived

in a cave a few hundred feet below that of her master. For nine months of the year, snow shut out the light. A blanket of yak's wool spread upon the floor served as a bed. The daily meal consisted of rice and some boiled vegetables which had no flavour. During the long periods of contemplation, speech, rest and movement were equally impossible.

In such circumstances, Alexandra Neel perfected her knowledge of the Thibetan language and studied the Lamaist philosophy which depends on understanding rather than logic.

As a scholar, she crossed the forbidden frontier. As a nun, she spent weeks in the great monastery of Shigat-se, secret and sacred as Lhasa itself. There she was received by the Tashi Lama, "the Precious Learned Man, emanation of Odpagmed, mystic Buddha of infinite light," equal in spiritual rank to the Dalai Lama, autocrat of Thibet.

But Madame Neel had made her fifth and most remarkable journey from China. Here, I regret to say, the story became entirely fabulous. For the narrator concerned himself only with the fact that his heroine had reached Lhasa, had lived there undiscovered for two months and had left city and country without her disguise being suspected. How she achieved such a miracle didn't interest him. That she had done it at all was sufficient.

China, of course, had been rent by civil war, but presumably it had become accustomed to such conditions. In any case, war, revolution, brigands, a bunch of heads hanging on the door post weren't likely to deter Alexandra Neel. She had no particular interest in Lhasa, an over-rated and ignorant city. Her researches would naturally have led her to the intellectual centres of North-Eastern Thibet, but she was in revolt against the ridiculous prohibition which closes Thibet to scholars. She looked upon it as a country enslaved by British prejudice. Already her caravans had been stopped at the frontiers. As a result of her secret visit to Shigat-se, a village, twelve miles from the hermitage where she lodged, had been fined 200 rupees for failing to report her passage to the British Resident. Such uncivilised proceedings roused

## WOMEN CALLED WILD

in her the determination to retaliate. At all costs, she would go to Lhasa, and she would do so by a pilgrim road under the very noses of the authorities who had presumed to forbid her entrance. Her victory would show what "the will of a woman could achieve," and it would encourage others "to pull down the antiquated barriers which, in Central Asia, surround a vast area extending approximately from longitude 79 degrees to 99 degrees."

The young man who'd already made a name for himself, became involved in the vast subject of magic. Madame Neel, it seemed, possessed a phurba (a ritualistic dagger) for which she'd struggled with the spirit of a Lama, a mighty magician, feared by the living and the dead. She'd met "nagspas" who could kill men slowly and at a distance. She'd visited the hereditary keepers of a poison which leaves no trace, which nobody has ever seen and which, at the appointed time, must be administered to the first available person, whether it be a bride, a stranger, or an only son. She'd seen the "tantrik" rites, during which the participants eat the flesh of a corpse, and she'd watched life prolonged by the infusion, not of blood but of vitality. In fact, implied my host, if she hadn't actually seen the dead raised, it was merely because she had been occupied with matters of greater importance. Then he blushed. "The science of magic is as out of place in a restaurant at the Grand Boulevard, as an elevator would be on a Tibetan mountain."

I watched the colour spreading under his skin. He sought to distract my attention. "There it is!" he said with a shrug. "Imagine to yourself what a life!" Adjusting a monocle which generally hung unnoticed, he studied the subject of our conversation. "Incredible," he murmured, "and for that all the more intriguing that it should be true." The monocle fell. "What an idea for a hat!"

Startled, I regarded the object set upon a pile of greyish brown hair, but it seemed to me as unsubstantial as everything else in the restaurant. I saw only a pass hung like a cable between two ranges and the eyes of a nun in the

Himalayas. "Allons ! I will introduce you," said a voice. I felt that we ought to have been carrying meal, butter and tea.

Madame David Neel proved to be the most unaffected person. She had every sense, including that of humour. For years she had collected and made a study of Buddhist manuscripts. Her erudition permitted her to write—in six languages—on such subjects as "Individualist Theories in Chinese Philosophy," and "Buddhist Modernism as opposed to the teachings of the Buddha," but she talked in a direct and simple fashion. Her wide mouth broke into a smile. She had enjoyed so much that other people would have found intolerable.

From her childhood she'd loved maps and liked being alone. Before she went to Lhasa, she'd lived in Thibet as a "gomchenma," a holy woman entitled to discuss mysticism and philosophy with lamas she met in Kham, in Amdo and in Tsang. But it was as an "arjopa," the poorest class of pilgrim, that she made her way from Chinese Turkestan, over the Dokar Pass by way of the Brahmaputra to Temo and Lhasa. These "arjopas" come from all parts of the country on foot, begging their way and carrying everything they possess on their backs.

The idea of crossing a succession of grim glacier passes and the "desert of grass" where the wind is an iced razor-blade without tent or blanket, with nothing but the clothes he stood up in and the food he could carry would be a nightmare to the ordinary traveller. Photographs of explorers' camps in the Himalayas show tents and packing-cases with a long retinue of porters and a mass of transport animals. Stoves, European provisions, sleeping-bags and beds, tools and rifles and a gramophone seem to be regarded as essential concomitants to an expedition into Central Asia. In the cases of the Citroën or the Chapman Andrews raids into quite well-known territory, the contents of a dozen stores appear to have accompanied the parties.

Only Madame Neel has been content to live as a Thibetan. During her four months' walk to the holy city, she wore a



heavy woollen robe and a fur-lined bonnet, but she had no blanket although, in mid-winter, she was obliged to cross snow-covered ranges rising to 18,000 feet. Her feet, often swollen from the long marches and cut by stones, were encased in the local sandals. Slung from ropes which cut into her shoulders, she carried a pack containing meal, salt, tea and butter, together with the necessary scientific instruments. In order to darken her skin, she smeared it, first with a paste made of cocoa and crushed charcoal, and later, when she neared Lhasa, with black lac. Huge rings hung from her ears. As a "gomchenma," she'd been obliged to shave her head, but when the preliminary journey from Gobi to Yuman had been completed and she changed her Chinese dress for a Thibetan one, she dyed what remained of her hair with ink and increased its length by plaiting into it strands of a yak's mane.

At an earlier period, she had adopted a young lama, by name Longden, and this genuine product of Thibet travelled with her to the forbidden city. He seems to have done most of the talking when peasants, officials, or fellow pilgrims asked questions, but it was Madame Neel who, forgetting her role of a poor and ignorant country woman, threw herself into highly erudite discussions concerning Buddhist and Tantrik philosophies with the students and priests they met on the way. Hence the story of the "gomchen" who appeared beside their fire one night, with an iron-tipped staff surmounted by a trident and a bowl made out of a skull.

"Jetsunma," he said, "what have you done with your 'rings of the initiate'?"

The counterfeit peasant realised she had been recognised, but couldn't remember having seen the lama who sat mute and immobile, only his eyes alive. Dismissing Longden, whose knowledge fell short of her own, she inveigled the ascetic into a discussion of Buddhist mysticism, while she struggled to remember the circumstances of their previous meeting.

"Do not try to remember, Jetsunma," he said at last. "I have as many faces as I desire, and this one you have

never seen." After which he rose, and staff in hand, his footsteps making no sound on the stony path, disappeared rather than went away.

Later, when Lhasa was very near, a lama clad in the white robe of the "Reskyangs," ascetics adept in the generation of internal heat so that they generally live among the snows, told her, "Jetsunma, this dress of a poor laywoman and the role of the old mother you've adopted do not suit you at all. You were braver when you wore your zen and your ten-treng. You must put them on when you leave Lhasa. You will get there. Do not fear." His head was bare. A tress of hair fell to his heels. With benevolent sarcasm he quoted, "Jigs med naljorma nga—I, a fearless yongini," and went away, smiling.

When one tries to imagine the Frenchwoman and her adopted son, shuffling across interminable miles of plain, uninhabited, with scarcely a track to lead the pilgrims from one towering mountain barrier to another, it must be with the memory of the usual traveller's camps in one's mind. When the average Himalayan explorer cursed the monotony of tinned meat, Madame Neel broke a twenty-four hours' fast with a cake of tsampa and some tea flavoured with butter and salt. When he shut himself into his tent and "got up a good old fug" with an oil-stove or a primus, she pulled her robe over her head and lay down in the lee of a boulder, or on the stony floor of a cave to be wakened by wild beasts or a glacial wind. Often she and Longden hid during the day-time, half-starved, but frightened of attracting attention until they'd perfected their roles, and marched throughout the night. The thorns and jungle of the valleys, intersected by dangerous rivers, gave place to chutes of loose stones. Up these the pilgrims clambered to the passes deep in snow and the frozen plateau on which nothing moves.

Madame Neel laughed as she spoke of her arrival in the sacred capital. A dust storm had removed the last vestiges of purpose. Stupefied and speechless, the two of them had stumbled into the market-place and stood there, staring, until a young woman, kind-hearted as the majority

of Thibetans, had led them to a ramshackle cottage occupied by beggars. Here, lying on the ground in an indescribable condition of dirt and discomfort, the mother turned to her adopted son, "This time we have won."

From a mound outside the cottage, the pilgrims had a view of the Potala, the palace of the Dalai Lama, a vast red building with golden roofs, lifted high above the town. Its symmetrical pedestal consists of monasteries, heaped one upon the other and the effect is of a fortress cleft by innumerable loopholes. But they were not content with the prospect for which the faithful risk death in the shape of beasts, men and gods. "Now that I'm here I'll see everything. I'll climb to the top of the Potala. I'll visit the famous shrines and the historical monasteries. I'll see the religious ceremonies, the races and the pageants of the New Year festival. I'll have my reward in full!" said Alexandra David Neel.

Her entry into the Potala reminded me of similar occurrences in other forbidden places. But it surprised me that at the end of so many months she did not feel herself to be the character she had assumed. For, after as long a period in Arab dress, I cease to think or speak as an Englishwoman. Therefore I cease to be afraid of being recognised. Yet in spite of the authenticity of her companion, a real lama conversant with the habits and the histories of the gods, capable of performing the requisite magic when anything got lost, or anyone wanted to know the future, Madame Neel still doubted her disguise and her power to sustain the part she'd so gallantly played. So when it came to "meeting the Potala" for the first time, she arranged with Longden that he should act as guide to a party of countrymen who'd come to Lhasa to sell their barley, while she slipped in behind them. But at the gate she met what might have been disaster, in the shape of a novice aged ten or twelve. He was a clumsy oaf, short and fat, with a face empurpled by his sense of importance and ears flapping like an elephant's. Acting as doorkeeper, he ordered the ignorant peasant to take off her bonnet before entering the holy place. There was nothing for it but to obey. The Dokpa humbly removed

her headgear, remembering as she did so that her hair had resumed its natural brown and that the jet black yak's hair plaited into it must look all the more extraordinary in consequence. "When I had to obey that horrid little toad," said Madame Neel, "I knew I should look funnier than any clown in any circus in the world."

Her dismay increased when she rejoined Longden. For he stared at her, stricken with horror, his mouth wide open and no words issuing from it until at last he was able to gasp, "What have you done with yourself? Who took your bonnet——"

When his aged mother, looking at that moment neither ancient nor maternal, explained her plight, he exclaimed trembling, "You look like a demon! I never saw such a face in all my life! Everybody will stare at you——" The villagers' indifference slightly reassured him, and the stricken man hurried into tales of gods, holy men and Dalai Lamas long translated to the world of spirits. A crowd gathered to listen. Interrupting comments on the learning of the kind lama, a pilgrim remarked: "Where do you think that woman came from?"

But while the imitation Dokpa felt as if arc lights beat upon her extraordinary head, he found the answer himself. "She must be a Ladki."

So Alexandra Neel found herself a "savage" from Ladak in Western Thibet, and since nothing is expected of those stupid people interested only in their cattle and the grass of the desert, she could pass unquestioned among the throng of pilgrims.

But amazing as was this journey on account of the hardships endured, the distances traversed and the dangers circumvented, it held at least the inspiration of movement and of a goal to be won. Still more astounding to my mind, were Madame Neel's retreats in the monasteries and hermitages of distant provinces. For two years she lived—as a special concession to her age and learning—in the celebrated monastery of Kum Bum in Amdo in North-Eastern Thibet. While there, she translated a number of precious

manuscripts: Seated on her balcony above the scarlet roofs with golden eaves, she could hear the lamas playing to the gods so that for a moment they might "rest and smile among their younger brothers, the humans." In the vast assembly hall, dimly lighted by butter-lamps burning before the tombs, the monks were seated motionless. Their dark crimson togas contrasted with the golden robes of the statues, row upon row of dead lamas, life size and no more immobile than the zealots who at their feet chanted in deep tones the solemn sentences of the scriptures.

On another occasion the Frenchwoman who knew more of Thibet than its inhabitants, lodged for many months in a gompa, built upon a mountain spur. Whitewashed cabins roofed with branches served for cells. The forest crept up to the doors. Hailstorms broke with the fury of demons seeking to destroy the saints who invaded their solitude.

The lamas built a hut for their guest, but they placed it amidst a waste of rocks, with great trees bent above it. For they wished to test the gomchenma's courage, to see if she dared rival their mystics by living along among phantoms and storms, separated from the world by a sea of mist.

A gale levelled the hut, but it was rebuilt in the same desolate spot. Madame Neel ordered no one to approach it for a month. Reading, meditating, and cooking her daily meal, she passed the days curtained by clouds, visited only by birds and wild beasts. When the lamas sought her at the end of her seclusion, they treated her with enhanced respect, for had she not struggled with devils and spirits and had she not defeated the fearful things which haunt the forest?

How many desert monasteries sheltered this unique traveller! How many gompas far removed from the bustle and activity of villages made her free of their learning! But further still in the wilderness, higher still on the giant peaks, she sought solitude in caves and in fragile shelters. Here among the snows, impassable from October to May, according to the custom of the gomchens she could meditate "face to face with the Infinite and the Eternal."

Not for weeks or months, but for several consecutive

years she lived alone in such a hermitage. Thousands of feet below her eyrie, in the first village, moved the procession of humanity—"Beings led by ignorance who tramp for fathomless ages the sorrowful roads to renewed births and deaths" (Buddhist Scriptures).

For the last dozen years, I've been asked: "What's the most beautiful place you've ever seen?" "What's the most awful thing that's ever happened to you?" "Among all the people you've met, dictators, democrats, revolutionaries, who most impressed you?" And according to their nationality, my interlocutors insist. "You must have been impressed by Roosevelt, or Stalin, or Mussolini? You cannot have been unaffected by Gandhi or Hitler, Mustapha Kemal, Ibn Saud, or the Shah of Persia?" It is impossible for me to answer the first two questions, for the "most beautiful place" is the one to which you never return and the "most awful thing" is that which never quite happens. But I can reply to the third query. For to my mind Madame David Neel is the most remarkable person alive in the world to-day.

## THE MURDERESS AND THE NUN

### *Pacific to Atlantic*

IN Tonga there used to be a notice over the door of the jail, "Any prisoners not in by six o'clock will be locked out for the night."

At that time the Queen's brother was serving a sentence for sheep-stealing, but he went out for a drive every afternoon in the royal carriage. One day he invited us to dine with him. We sat on mats in the yard and ate yam, plantain and stuffed pig, but when it was time for us to go, nobody could find the chief jailer. Evidently he'd locked up for the night and gone home.

There was nothing for it but to occupy a spare cell. An assistant jailer conducted us to it, but when he wanted to lock us in, we protested. Anxiously he peered round the yard. Then he told he us really couldn't be responsible for our safety unless he knew we were under lock and key.

"Why?" we asked, regarding with distaste the cockroaches which rushed about the floor, waving expectant whiskers.

"Murderers," he replied.

"But why should they want to murder us?"

The assistant jailer showed surprise. To his mind any decent murderer took his profession seriously and practised it whenever possible.

By this time half the occupants of the prison had gathered round the door. They looked as mild as it is possible to be. One of them was undoubtedly white. "What has he done?" I asked in a stage whisper.

The jailer made a gesture across his throat. "Kill wife—cut off her head—take it to police."

Without further argument, he locked the door. We spent an uncomfortable night, with rats gambolling in our hair and cockroaches looking for our toe-nails on which, of course, they'd hoped to feed. In the morning, the head jailer arrived with an infinity of apologies, some weak tea and a mess of taro-root. It tasted and smelt like soap, but we had to eat it to avoid hurting his feelings. While we did so, wondering how soon we could conveniently be sick, he pointed out a frail and charming person who wore a wreath of scarlet canna lilies on his head. "He very big murderer," said the jailer.

"How long is he in for?" Perhaps we misunderstood the reply, but it sounded like "Once he come here, he never look back." For no logical reason the phrase "a pillar of salt" passed through my mind. It was not particularly appropriate, but I thought of other jails where prisoners, voluntary or otherwise, suffered a life-sentence.

At Battambang in Cochin China, the prison is crowded with enchanting young women who have concerned themselves too closely with the private affairs of their husbands. I remember the long white building, with brilliant flowers under the windows and a lot of girls seated on mats doing a minimum of work while they talked in soft sibilant voices. One of them looked about twelve. She was small, golden-brown and supple, a gay little image from Annam, in a robe of tight-fitting green silk. "She's so absurdly young," I said. "What can she have done?"

"Assassination of her husband," replied the jailer, without interest.

I protested, "She doesn't look like a murderess," and the Frenchman regarded me with amusement. "What would you that she should look like? Between you yourself and a murderess, there is only one moment of emotion." He spoke as if he thought an Anglo-Saxon incapable of such a moment.

On the way out, we passed a toothless old creature, the



proverbial bag of bones, seated contentedly upon her heels, chewing betel-nut. "Well, what's she done?" I asked, for her wrists were brittle as reeds and I couldn't imagine her with sufficient initiative to do more than pilfer from a rubbish heap.

"Assassination of her husband," answered the imperturbable jailer.

Stung to retort, I suggested that Cambodian husbands must be particularly aggravating. "As to husbands, it is about the same thing everywhere," returned the jailer with a shrug, "but the women here are savages—or angels! They have not yet forgotten Eden." Pleased with the reply, he pointed out several other child-like creatures with rice-powder on their faces and flowers stuck behind their ears, who had rid themselves of their husbands.

"After all," he concluded, "an assassination is not a vulgar sin."

At that moment, a European woman came down the long room, filled with small delicious murderesses seated cross-legged upon bright-coloured mats and looking just like dolls. She wore the habit of a charitable order. Her black coiffe contrasted with the colourless walls. Her hands were hidden in the ample folds at her breast. She moved very quietly and with an infinity of assurance. Bowing to us—a gesture so slight, so reserved, that it accentuated rather than bridged the distance or the difference between us—she spoke familiarly to the crone with a betel-nut bulging her cheek. I remember the picture they made, the sister in flowing white with her pale skin and her great quiet eyes that she had schooled beyond the possibility of a backward glance, and the murderess who must have forgotten, long ago, her moment of violence.

"Hasn't the old woman finished her term?" I asked, but I thought of the other's self-imposed sentence.

"She doesn't want to go," returned the jailer. "What is there for her in the world?"

## THE MURDERESS AND THE NUN

I noticed then that a warder, a religious and a private of the Foreign Legion, are apt to apply the same term to what lies outside prison, camp, or cloister.

"Are they all in for murder?" I asked.

"But yes. We have no bad criminals here," remarked the man in a pleasant, father-of-a-family voice.

In Brazil, I found it equally necessary to readjust my conceptions according to the latitude, mental as well as geographical. For in São Paulo I was shown an admirable modern prison. The warders appeared to be on the best possible terms with the convicts. One of them showed signs of being sincerely shocked when I asked him if there were many thieves among the State guests. "Oh no!" he protested. "Brazilians are very honest. Nearly all these . . ." he pointed to a group gathered round a peacock in the yard, "are murderers."

We met a gentle countryman who'd filled his cell with books, sacred pictures and rosaries. He had been sentenced to twelve years for killing his wife, and though we didn't show any curiosity, he explained, "In Brazil, it is hot and women are very annoying."

The dentist had followed his trade "in the world" until in a moment of excitement, at an election, he had obliterated a political opponent. The cook, who made superlative coffee, was rather proud of having been convicted of "six successful rapes."

"But he is not a good man," said the warder, who evidently regarded murder as a more or less gentlemanly pursuit.

In Russia, I remember asking a girl who'd been condemned to eight years in an agricultural labour colony for the most unnecessary slaughter of a lover, why she did not escape. There seemed to be no guards. The settlement differed in no way from the surrounding villages, where men and women worked as servants of the new machinery. "If I went away, I mightn't be allowed to return," she replied.

Prisons it seems are full of the unexpected. Not long

ago, in Uruguay, which is an extremely modern republic, experimenting with all sorts of advanced legislation, I went to see the women's prison and found it a convent made out of an old mill.<sup>1</sup> There were no warders or wardresses. A Mother Superior, evidently combining the capabilities of Napoleon, Savonarola and Elizabeth Fry, and five sisters, dealt faithfully with forty prisoners.

The contrast between the building, its logical inhabitants and the waifs who'd been thrust into it, was amazing. I remember a court, filled with flowers and surrounded by a delicious little arched cloister, with a Madonna in a blue robe and some verses extolling "Pity, Daughter of the Most High." The floors were of brilliant red tiles. Birds with scarlet crests perched upon a crucifix.

The sisters moved as if they had no feet. Their voluminous skirts were sails in the wind. Like barques they bore down upon us. Confident, cheerful, with that air of amused serenity rarely seen out of a convent, they talked to us, their hands hidden, their words running over each other. For what were the women condemned? Theft, murder, procuration, but mostly the killing, in moments of frenzy, of husbands unwanted for years.

"They are of a low class?" I asked.

"See then," explained the Assistant Superior, "the murderesses are women like the rest of us. With a murderess one can talk, but when there is a procureur here, she makes vile the whole atmosphere."

We passed, by way of a great church, the treasure and the pride of the convent, to an inner yard, where the prisoners were ranged in two rows. On the left stood the already condemned in blue overalls, one of them with a parrot on her wrist. There were only five of them, and they looked not more than half- or quarter-white. Negro blood thickened their features and curled their hair. Indian blood accentuated their bones and painted their skins. They appeared to possess considerably less than the normal intelligence. One who wore several holy medals pinned to her blouse, couldn't

<sup>1</sup> A State prison, yet the private property of the Order of the Good Shepherd.

remember her sentence. She gaped at her neighbours and they answered for her. "Five years."

Others had been condemned to thirty and thirty-five years, life sentences, because there is no capital punishment in Uruguay. The young ones had all committed murder. They had come from mud cabins in the camp, or on the outskirts of a town. They could neither read nor write, and they'd done no other work than sweep an earthen floor, bear children as repetitively as the animals, and cook roast meat for their man's supper until they felt, apparently, they could bear the sight of him no longer.

On the other side stood a motley collection in striped prints. They might have been years in prison, but they did not yet know their sentences, for Uruguayan justice is slow and lawyers prolong the cases indefinitely in the hope of benefit to their clients. Most of these "procesadas"<sup>1</sup> gave the impression of being stunted or malformed, perhaps because their features rarely bore any relation, one to the other. They looked as if they'd been thrown on to the nearest face and left there whether they fitted or not. It was difficult to think of their owners as ordinary human beings, with habits, hopes and fears. However young they might be, they looked faded and stale. I imagined a smell of decay in spite of the evidences of scrubbing and the sweet common sense of the sisters. The Director of Prisons, immaculate in a pearl-grey suit, spoke under his breath. "To me, these prisoners are not women. They are things. I've never played games. I don't drink and I've no vices. Outside my work, all my interest is in women. But when I come here, however much in love I may be, all feelings die in me. I am cold as a stone." He sighed.

Between two swart heads at the end of the line, I caught a sheen of gold. It was bent over a strip of embroidery, and the woman did not look up as we approached. Her hair was greying under the brilliance of peroxide, but there was no doubt she came from a different world. She had been a definite personage with a name and a background, not just

<sup>1</sup> In the course of being tried.

"José Maria's girl," or "that fatherless slut, Juan's daughter has got herself." She might even have been good-looking before prison robbed her of all that had made up her womanhood.

"Who is she?" I asked, while I wondered to what over-exigent husband, or to what importunate lover this woman, who was still something of a person, had put a sudden and effective end. For those hands would not blunder. If they had to alter the shape of destiny, they would do it to some purpose.

The sisters hesitated. The littlest, round and gay, with lips always ready to smile, looked at the hump made by her toes under her clean white habit.

The Assistant Superior said sadly, "A terrible case. Proxenetism."

I didn't know what it meant, so I nodded with equal seriousness, and the Director of Prisons explained in Spanish, which is a revealing language. The Señora was of good family, well known. His words sketched a background sufficiently spacious. I saw the peroxide head as it had been, held high. But the family fortune had disappeared, like so many others. To replace it, the woman—still possessed of a certain distinction—had started a house of a certain kind—enfin, a house of convenience! The Director of Prisons made no gesture because his hands were in his pockets, but his voice expressed a great deal more than it said. I could imagine the illicit traffic which, for some time, had been hidden under a name, a reputation and family connections.

We left the yard where the women of the mud huts, simple folk who'd translated an oath into a blow and struck too hard or with an unaccustomed weapon, pressed about a sister, careful not to touch her habit, but claiming her attention with the insistence of children unused to being refused.

Apart, leaning against a pillar, the woman with the garish hair stared after us. Her eyes reflected far more than her present surroundings. She looked back, undoubtedly, towards Sodom in flames.

As we were about to leave, after being introduced to a number of mothers, whole-heartedly playing with their children who, with equal singleness of purpose, had despatched those children's fathers, I glanced into a room with barred windows and an open door. It was, so far as I remember, whitewashed and white-tiled. It looked clean and bright, and it opened on to a little court. Standing against the wall, leaning against it as if she sought its support, was a European woman, in a black-and-white dress. I stared, aghast, because if her clothes were shapely, her face was the reverse. A swollen balloon of a face, it sagged between lank brown hair and the folds of flesh about the neck. Eyeballs, lips and skin showed the same mottled colouring. The hands were small and shapeless. A wedding-ring had sunk deep into the flesh.

The sisters grouped about us, similar only in their habits and the black coiffes which make objets d'art of the most ordinary faces, turned as the woman called to them. The next moment we were in the white room, listening to a flood of Spanish. "They have said things which are not true. They are all against me . . ." cried the woman. Tears poured from her eyes and dripped unnoticed down her cheeks. Her fat hands shook. Colour and shape ran together and were lost.

"It is a Frenchwoman," explained the Director, "married to an Englishman, Secretary of the Bank, a very good fellow. She killed him. They say she was drunk. One can see she has been accustomed to drinking."

The woman wailed. She had not intended to do it.

"Madame," said the Director of Prisons, very courtly, "it was so unnecessary to do it. In our country we have the divorce. . . ."

But a sister, with a skin that told of soap and water, spoke gently in our ears. "Do not go without saying something to cheer her."

Crossing to a bed, unblemished in its whiteness, she picked up a piece of gros-point. "Look, she has done this, is it not clever?"

So I saw them standing together, the murderess who had killed in a fit of drunken fury, and the sister who, for the thirty years that constituted her life, had slept in a cell, a bare six feet by four, with a grille opening into the dormitory of the unsentenced, where anxiety and terror kept restless vigil.

"What will happen to her?"

"I do not know," said a tall, dark sister, who had no fear of life or death. "Perhaps I did not know what she was doing, but she has no courage. . . ." I could understand that to such a woman, content to immure herself among criminals and to treat the saving of souls as a good honest job with as much variety and humour about it as anyone need ask, courage must seem important.

So I thought of another murderess, the celebrated, or infamous, Doctor Wynekoop who, for a space, filled the front pages of American newspapers. She had been accused and was subsequently convicted of killing her daughter-in-law on her own operating-table. The prosecution suggested, but failed, I think, to prove, that she did it in order to help her son to a more satisfactory marriage. But there had been other unexplained deaths in the grim old house, where the doctor lived with a companion.

It all happened in Chicago, just before Repeal, when everybody was on the look out for a new sensation. I'd been dining with the smartest young woman in town and half a dozen of her friends. It was decided that we must make a night of it and we did so in no mean fashion. We began with one of those "do-anything-you-like" sort of fights in which one of the combatants is likely enough to lose an eye or an ear. We continued by way of the latest bar and the largest swimming-pool. We then went south to a joint run by the leader of the Black Hand gang, responsible for some twenty "cuttings" a week in the Italian quarter, after which we visited an attic where a respectable person, in black bombazine with a cameo brooch, sold dope.

ended up at police headquarters.

Some member of the party owned half a newspaper.

Another possessed a name that meant dollars. So we were taken to see "drunks," a hold-up gang captured in the act, a suicide who had "fallen down on the job," a red-headed "dame suspected of peddling,"<sup>1</sup> and, finally, as the show spectacle, Doctor Wynekoop. I had no interest in the woman, but I was pushed into a cell among the crowd. Pressed against the bars which divided it in half, I witnessed as odd a sight as has come my way in a civilised country.

A table occupied the centre space. At one end of it sat a spare, grim woman with greying hair. Her clothes looked as if she detested them. Her head was bent upon her hands, but she could not avoid the torch which a detective flashed in her eyes. He was a great hulking man, with a hat two sizes too small, doubtless an excellent father and husband, but, at the moment, he'd forgotten everything except the necessity of forcing the prisoner "to come clean." He'd already discarded his coat. His shirt had been pulled open at the neck, but his hat still hung on the back of his head. He kept thrusting his clenched hands in front of the woman's face and sometimes, when she tried to evade the light that must have been a knife driven into her eyeballs, he pushed back her chin.

Then a lawyer interferred, and a minister, standing in the rear, muttered consolation or advice.

Policemen in uniform and detectives looking far more disturbed than the prisoner, crowded against the table. A journalist tried to take a photograph through the bars.

Doctor Wynekoop adhered to her story. She admitted nothing. Her thin legs were crossed under a shabby black skirt. She did not move them. A wisp of hair fell across her forehead and she didn't trouble to brush it away. Hard, quiet, yielding no single point, she faced her inquisitors and defeated them.

Men's voices rose and interrupted each other. Gestures became unrestrainedly savage. The lean figure, with elbows on the table, was the calmest in the cell. She denied, and she went on denying.

<sup>1</sup> Selling dope, cocaine, heroin, etc.





of young people who played tennis and the gramophone, and made a great deal of noise. I found it difficult to distinguish between my host's own family and the nieces and nephews, some of whom were married and had children of their own.

One hot afternoon, while we sat on the porch with a furious orange creeper pouring over the columns and a parrot climbing up and down it, I asked about a particularly splendid young woman, very fair, with eyes taken from the sea, who could have lifted ten stone and thought nothing of it.

"My brother's daughter. He is dead." That was all.

The same sort of reply put an end to my other questions, but not to my curiosity. I made discreet enquiries from the large and kindly people who came to the house, but, if there was a secret, they respected it. Something had happened years ago—it must have been twenty-five or thirty—to orphan the nieces and nephews who made free of their uncle's house, but nobody would talk about it. After all, a sudden tragedy is common enough in the tropics. There had been wrecks among the shifting shoals and lives lost in the forest, where trees can be as poisonous as snakes. I remembered returning from a day's sailing to find the customs house flag at half-mast. A man with whom we'd dined the previous night had died. Within a few hours, we attended his funeral. But these were all things one could talk about—and did. The calamity which had robbed the gorgeous Marie Louise of father and mother and, I suspected, of a certain amount of her childhood, belonged to a different category.

I learned about it at last, from an Englishman. A dance was in progress. Lanterns glimmered in the garden, to the indignation, presumably, of the fire-flies who found themselves unable to compete. Music filled the porches and strong square feet made the most of it. The bungalow had been swept and garnished. Everything had been given an extra coat of polish. Walls and handles, brass-bound chests

and paved floors gleamed with a positive delight in their own cleanliness.

With my partner, I wandered in search of coolness. A small room I hadn't previously noticed, opened off a back verandah. Ordinarily, it may have been kept for trunks and that litter which is inherited from one generation to another, but on this special occasion, it held chairs and a plant with a refreshing smell. We established ourselves comfortably with cigarettes and because we had nothing particular to talk about, I looked at the incongruous collection of photographs on the walls. Some of them were yellowed and eaten by insects. One showed a serious Marie Louise fifteen years ago, at least. I remarked on it, and my companion said, "She felt it most. She was the only one old enough to realise it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you know?"

I was afraid, if I said "no," he mightn't tell me, so it was with something of an effort that I replied, "I don't know a thing, but I'd like to, awfully."

"I don't see why you shouldn't," said the Englishman. "After all, it happened a quarter of a century ago and it's common property."

He ground out a cigarette. Silence fell. It was apparently not so easy to tell. Getting up, he walked about the room, peering at the photographs. "There must be something of her here. They can't have destroyed every group with her in it."

But they had.

Impatiently, I said, "Don't be so mysterious . . ." and the Englishman came and stood in front of me, looking down with a half smile, "It's very simple," he said. "But I don't know where to begin. . . ."

"At the beginning!" I interrupted.

"Nobody knows the beginning, except that old —," he mentioned the name of my host's brother, "had a mistress and his wife wouldn't stand it. Of course, there are all sorts of tales. There would be, but the long and short of it

is, she killed him, shot him half a dozen times in the chest and refused to give any explanation."

My mouth hung open. I could feel it weighted. For once, imagination had been outdistanced by fact. I'd thought of all sorts of explanations, but none so stark. "What happened to her?" I asked.

"She served a life sentence for murder, here, in the local jail, which is not exactly adapted to whites."

"She survived it?" I asked, picturing, for no reason at all, a slighter edition of Marie Louise thrust among the sweating and unwashed blacks who yelled themselves hoarse when one of them had a stomach-ache and the others thought her possessed.

"Yes. She's out now."

"Here?" I asked dismayed.

"No," he replied, and at the time I didn't notice his hesitation.

"For heaven's sake tell me the rest," I implored. "They're not Latins here. They're unemotional, hard-headed Northerners like ourselves. And none of us would shoot a husband when he could conveniently be divorced. . . ."

"They're damned good mothers," retorted the Englishman.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, perhaps, but the other woman was a Creole. She knew a hell of a lot and they say—but they say all sorts of things, of course—that she used to try it out on the children."

"Oh, what an impossible idea!"

"I dare say it is," he agreed, for it was much too hot to argue. "All the same, some of these half-castes are pretty impossible people."

At that we left it. And nobody ever told me any more.

Later on, when I'd seen the sights of the town and made the usual excursions into the forest, I insisted on visiting the "House of Lepers," not the huge Government Leprosarium,

but the institute organised by a Catholic sisterhood. Everybody said it would be a horrible sight, but I am used to leprosy. I've seen it in Eastern bazaars, where lepers hide themselves completely under their yellow robes, and in Brazilian Matto Grosso, where they ride from door to door, never dismounting, but holding out a begging-bowl, to which none dare refuse a contribution. I've seen it, far worse, in those holy cities where remnants of human beings crawl about the temple steps and in the mountains of Abyssinia where shapes of terror, more bestial than human, lurk by the trails to prey upon a solitary traveller.

So I crossed the bridge which separates the living from those who have died to the world and I found myself in a pleasant place. There were low white buildings with arcaded porches and creepers tidily arranged. The flower-beds were brilliant and formal, the grass very green. Enormous butterflies drifted across the lawns, and birds overweighted by their tails flickered about on the roofs. It should have been gay, but it was, perhaps, too well ordered. The dormitories were spotlessly clean. The night-dress cases on the pillows were edged with frills and embroidered in huge scarlet letters.

My heart ached, possibly because the blacks and browns, negroes, Hindus, an occasional Javanese, are used to such a heaped-up, helter-skelter way of living. They must feel lonely, I thought, with no familiar friendly disorder in which to lose their few possessions—and their fears.

I saw a family, complete except for the mother, who had been left immune and "free" on the other side of the canal. The father held a brown baby on his knee and rocked it clumsily.

A young couple had married in the institute, but they did not look happy.

"Most of them," explained the Mother Superior, in a gentle, rather toneless, voice, "are better off here than they could ever be in their homes."

She showed me the field where dark children, with perhaps a leg or an arm bandaged, played a leisurely kind of

football. She indicated the theatre where the lepers put on their own plays. On a bench in the sunshine some lads who looked as if they ought to have been doing a full day's work, sat with their hands hanging, while they listened to the wireless. "Oh you nasty man . . ." drawled a nasal voice from another hemisphere. The boys didn't shuffle their feet after the custom of negroes with toes alive to rhythm. They just sat there, mute.

"Does it matter?" I asked. "I mean about their being more comfortable here. It doesn't make them any happier, does it?"

"No," said the Mother Superior.

Her face was round with rather a broad nose. Her eyebrows stopped in the middle as if they'd been singed. Only her eyes were remarkable. They held patience, strength and resignation. But she got nothing from the lepers, except respect. When she talked to them, they responded, unsmiling.

We went to the hospital. Outside, in the garden and under the arches where a European, who'd been thirty-two years in the institute, was teaching an Indian how to whittle a rough flute, there had been few signs of the disease. Most of the lepers had no more than an insensible spot which could be covered with a bandage. In the hospital it was different. Mutilated shapes lay helpless on the beds. In some cases lips and nostrils were gone. The eyes stared out of red pits. A horribly musty smell struggled with disinfectants.

As we came in, a sister was standing beside one of the beds laughing, and the stump of a man over whom she leaned, shared her merriment. The reflection of it lingered about the chasms of his face even when she moved away from him.

"This is Sister Anunziata," said the Mother Superior, and with no further explanation she left us.

It was to see Sister Anunziata that I returned again and again to the House of Lepers. I could not escape from her beauty. I went to look at her as at a picture in a gallery and

I stayed because she made me believe in all sorts of things that had no place in a leprosarium. For she saw the inmates as pilgrims, instead of prisoners. She helped them to make a crusade out of the weariest of life's journeys. Doubting neither its purpose nor its goal, she was able to imbue a couple of hundred natives, most of whom were pagan and many of them half savage, with her own undaunted faith. She believed so strongly in eternity that she could not regard the span of human existence as more than a test, or an opportunity. Clear-eyed, she looked at the world and found it good because it led to a future that would be incomparably better. And she had such lovely eyes. No wonder the lepers knew her as "the beautiful lady." They didn't want to call her "sister." She didn't need a name. I've seen children stroke her to see if she were real. And in her case, the lepers forgot their care not to touch a "real person." They pressed close to her and she didn't mind.

Gradually I learned her history. She was French and of a great family. She'd been engaged to the most popular personage in Paris, and on the very eve of the wedding, she'd left the house, astir with gay preparations, to seek refuge in a convent.

"Refuge from what?" I asked the Mother Superior.

But the quiet rotund little woman didn't know. Her lips folded smoothly one upon the other.

"The good God did not intend her for marriage."

That I could not believe. If ever lips were made for love and laughter and the delight of a man, they were those of Sister Anunziata. Of course, she ought to have been married. It was a crime that she should be here. I couldn't think of words big enough to express what I felt about "the beautiful lady" wasted in a house of lepers. Only, of course, she wasn't wasted at all. She turned the barren dormitories into a home. She made dead people alive. She even made them laugh.

Oddly enough, there was one other woman in the leprosarium who could do what she liked with the inmates. She was an entirely different sort of person, a lay sister,

elderly rather than middle-aged, with a rough strong manner that put heart into the lepers. I could never think of her as having been young, but neither could I imagine her really old. She had straight grey hair that looked as if it had been sheared. Her skin and lips were dry and colourless except for the blotches made by broken veins, but the shape of her bones was excellent. At times, when her eyes were turned away, she had the ghost of good looks. She wore a crucifix under her grey overall. The garment dragged across her breasts and I could see the shape of the cross.

"How long has she been here?" I asked the Mother Superior.

"Five years. No, it must be six now."

"Is she going to become a sister?" I continued, ignorant of rules.

"I think not," replied the Mother Superior.

When I wasn't with "the beautiful lady," I trudged about with the woman known to the lepers as *Mademoiselle*, and to the religious as *Claire*. Only *Anunziata* addressed her as "my sister." They were as different as two people could possibly be, yet they understood each other. Perhaps they had never put it into words—there may have been no need—but the understanding existed. I liked "*Mademoiselle*," and I felt she ought to have had a more satisfactory name. She was so definitely worth while. She would shake a hysterical girl into some sort of sense, and comfort an old man with a raucous tale. The lepers didn't think of her as "a real person." She was a tonic and a joke, better than the doctor any day, and she could let them have it when she was angry. It was no use trying to fool her. She knew what they were about and told them in quick sharp words, common words too, that made them feel they were having a high old time in the café they used to frequent.

I remember thinking that if Sister *Anunziata* supplied a bridge to heaven, that gay, fanciful heaven of the holy pictures in the chapel, *Mademoiselle* was a plank by which lost bodies regained the world. "What made you come here?" I asked her once.



She turned her faded blue eyes on me. They looked as if they'd been over-washed. "I was a woman alone. Without a family, what can one do? One feels oneself useless. So I came where I knew I should be of use."

A simple matter, I thought. Here, certainly, was one of the unwanted millions who had not been able to achieve a husband.

Before I left the country, I learned why "the beautiful lady" had fled to a convent twenty-four hours before she should have married the bearer of a tremendous name, in the cathedral of Notre-Dame. I learned it because I wanted to know so much that I plucked up my courage and asked Sister Anunziata.

By that time, we'd become as inseparable as the circumstances permitted. We'd discovered mutual friends in Paris. I'd given her news she wanted. She'd talked a good deal about the gay times she'd had in places I also knew, and talked as if she didn't in the least regret them.

That used to puzzle me. For she spoke as a grown-up, amused by the remembrance of a childish fondness for sweets. So, one day, sitting under a Flamboyant tree, with a parrot making angry noises at something we couldn't see, I said all in one sentence, "Will you tell me, because I do want to know so much, for I know him too, and like him, why wouldn't you marry him?"

Sister Anunziata hesitated. Then she said, "If you know him, you needn't really ask."

"Not Angèle!" I said, for really Angèle, good-hearted, golden-voiced though she might be, seemed too insignificant to obstruct the path of "the beautiful lady."

"Yes, of course. Angèle."

"He would have given her up."

"He couldn't have given her up. He might have tried, but he couldn't have done it."

I didn't like to ask more, but I remembered the prestige of the two families in Paris. It seemed impossible that a scrap of a woman who sang on the Grands Boulevards could be sufficient to upset their plans.

Sister Anunziata blinked in the bright light. Her voice sounded cheerful and content. I noticed she spoke as if the subject were no concern of hers. "She came to me that afternoon. There was a child. . . . She seemed to me good. How could I take him?"

Sister Anunziata sounded so certain of herself that I dared not even comment. Perhaps the Mother Superior had been right. I don't know if it was the shadow of the coiffe, but it seemed to me at the moment that the beauty of lips and eyes was enhanced by something which could never have been for a husband.

As I walked towards the gate-house where one scraped one's feet on a sterilised mat and washed one's hands in disinfectants, I saw Mademoiselle applying vigorous corporal punishment to a youngster who had bitten another in the neck.

Of her, I had learned only two facts, but they were significant. Before she crossed the bridge over the canal, from whose bank lepers talk to their friends, the "real people" of the town, her name had been Marie Louise. She had served a life sentence for the murder of her husband.

## A WOMAN WITH THE LEGION

### *South of the Atlas—Morocco*

SOUTH of the Atlas and the Sirocco had begun to blow ! As long as it lasted everyone would be—according to the Arabs—“ a little mad.” With my head down, I rode along the wadi, but the palms offered no shelter. They looked like agitated feather brooms with their stems tucked into pink cotton-wool. Behind me rose the towers of Bou Denib, with a froth of almond petals breaking over the ramparts. Behind me, also, I could hear the clinking of the Spahis’ bridles. I envied the men because they could hide their faces in the hoods of their scarlet cloaks, whereas mine was exposed to the wind.

As a whisper it had come out of the South. Dust spirals whirled in its path. Among the great dunes, it gathered force. Whipping their crests into spray, it swept on across the desert, raging into the valleys, where it scattered the blossom and broke down the old mud walls, and flinging itself, at last, against the Atlas.

From Mauretania to Thibesti the palms lashed themselves to fury and every traveller disappeared into his burnouse. Sand spun up from the Hamada till the millions of curious grey fungi which the natives call “ cauliflowers of Bon Anané ” looked as if they were covered with tomato sauce. But Sirocco was not satisfied. It shrieked into the camel’s-hair shelters of the Bedouin, swung labouring caravans into circles, blinded the eyes of Tuaregs, inflamed the skins and tempers of the city dwellers.

At Bou Denib, where I had been staying with the Colonel

commanding the district, it crept through the crevices of doors and windows, stimulating and exasperating. And in its wake it left a red mist of sand, intangible as the madness for which the Arabs waited.

I couldn't bear to sit inside a box of a house with Sirocco crashing against the walls, so I thought I'd ride to the fort where a squadron of the Legion were quartered. "It is folly," said my host, but he lent me a horse, which drooped and shivered under the driving sand, and I went as quickly as possible, feeling like a swimmer with the tide against me.

I remember as I approached the cliff, the whole landscape seemed to be changing shape. The only solid thing about it was the fort, clinging to the crest of one of those definitely shaped ridges which break the monotony of the Hamada. Mud-walled, desolate and menacing, it withstood the fury of Sirocco. Above it, the tricolour tore at the flagstaff like a thing possessed.

An officer forced his way across the yard. "What a day you have chosen!" he exclaimed. He was a small man in a stained linen coat and patched breeches. The crescent of the Spahis gleamed on his collar, and under a vast turban, his face showed mottled red and white. He put a hand on the neck of my disconsolate beast and talked to it while I dismounted. Then he led me across a square intersected by rows of earthen huts. Where the doors faced away from the wind, groups of men lounged against them, smoking, arguing and spitting. They wore faded khaki, or dingy blue slops, and nearly everyone had a dog. "That is the family of the Legionary," explained the little captain, proud of his squadron. "We have fifty-two dogs here. I encourage them. These men have neither family nor hearth, but they have their dogs and they sleep with them, and that reminds them a little of home."

"They look fairly cheerful," I remarked, as I followed the captain to his quarters, mud-built, in an embrasure of the wall, commanding a wide sweep of frontier between desert and mountains. "Yes, it goes well so long as they do not think. I have rabbits here, and pigs and sheep,

beside the horses, a whole menagerie for them to look after. One must occupy them, for if they stay in one place more than a few months they get the 'cafard,'<sup>1</sup> and then God knows what it comes into their heads to do."

He stooped through a low door and I followed. Under an awning stretched over the rampart, some chickens and a kid with a tattered ear looked out of packing-cases. But Captain Dumont led me through another earthen doorway into a room like a tent. Moroccan carpets hung upon the walls and ceiling. Others covered the hard divan and served as curtains at the entrance to a sleeping place.

"It is comfortable, hein?" said Dumont. "Like this, I have a small interior which I take with me wherever I go." He invited me to sit on a particularly fine prayer-rug, and his servant, who looked like a Norse peasant, brought tea, very sweet and flavoured with mint.

"Have you any English here?" I asked, with a glass in my hand.

"There is but one, a brigadier,<sup>2</sup> who, yesterday, signed on for another five years. He is a type that, but he will not speak of himself. The others, they come at night and tell me of their affairs—over a mouthful of anisette, you understand?"

I could imagine the intimate, stuffy atmosphere of the room, the lamp shaded by one of those native scarves, and the captain, with his collar undone, his face companionably red, his eyes very round and blue.

"There is one here, a German, who cut his wife into three pieces, but *all the same* he is a good fellow. A coup de tête, you will comprehend?"

"I don't know that I do," I remarked, wondering what had happened to the three pieces.

But the captain pointed out of the window to where the red earth blazed to the horizon. "In this country one must understand everything," he said and he began to roll a cigarette, slowly, between stained fingers. "See you, I have here a Colonel of the Imperial Russian Guard, and a Serbian

<sup>1</sup> The blues.

<sup>2</sup> Non-commissioned rank comparative to a corporal.

decorated by Peter the First, and a banker who ran away with his caisse. That one wants to re-establish himself; but I made enquiries, and in his country there is no amnesty for crime with violence. One asks no questions with the Legion. That is understood, but, all the same, if one is sympathetic, one learns."

I put down my glass. Imagination filled in the background of the picture. So much trouble that grown men might not think and at the end of it all, after the building of roads and the fighting in the Atlas, or the Naboth's vineyard of Taffilelt, and the continuous movement, the "cafard" from whose bitterness there was no escape except by getting drunk on anisette in the native café.

"We had one here whom nobody could explain," continued Dumont, who had been transferred from a squadron of Spahis, because, in spite of his soft flesh and his reddened goggle eyes, he understood men and horses and could master them both. "Finally, one day, I said to him, 'Tell me then, my brave, what were you in the world?' And he replied to me, smiling, 'A priest.' Me, I was astonished, although I had noticed he seemed familiar with the mass, so I pushed my indiscretion so far as to ask why he had left his parish. Parbleu, he had humour, that one, for he answered, 'My captain, without a woman, which one of us men could have lost paradise?'"

"And the Englishman?" I asked, after a pause.

"Oh him. You shall see for yourself."

Towards evening, a lull suggested that Sirocco drew breath before renewing an assault which had already littered the yard with desert cauliflower. We went out. It seemed unnaturally quiet. A man leaned against the parapet where the cliff dropped into the wadi and watched a Belgian teaching his dog to walk on its hind-legs, with a cap on its head and a cigarette in its mouth.

"Hey, Robert, my friend, come here!"

The Legionary approached, bareheaded.

"I have told this lady you are English and she wishes to shake you the hand."

Embarrassed, we stood in front of each other. The captain's amiability enveloped us as a cloak, but we had nothing to say. "Are you English?" I asked at last.

"Yes."

"You like it here?"

"Yes."

"I came across the Atlas by Midelt, before snow closed the road. How different it is down here. . . ."

"Yes."

Then I realised I was still holding out my hand. The man hadn't touched it and I didn't know what to do with it. I looked up at him. He was thin, with grim lines dragging at his features, but he seemed to be amused. Hurriedly, I dropped my hand. "D'you know Erfoud and Wad Ziz?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I want to go there if the French will let me."

Another monosyllable and after that I gave it up. The Legionary saluted Dumont and went back to his companion, who had induced the dog to march, sentry-wise, upon the wall.

"What would you? Not communicative, hein?" commented my companion, and at that moment the sun sank behind the rim of the desert. A bugle called and the Captain of Spahis stiffened. From the top of the fort the tricolour came down. Scattered about the square, the troopers saluted. I wondered what they felt about it, if it had become a mechanical action, or if, standing there, on the edge of the world, exiles every one of them and nameless, they thought of their own countries while they saluted a foreign flag.

Slowly, I rode back across the wadi. The fires of sunset burned low. Sirocco battered against the cliffs and stripped great sheaves from the palms. With the hiss of sand and the grunt of indignant camels trampling in the yards, came the far clear note of bugles. I thought of the devil-ridden face of the English brigadier. There could be no doubt about his devils. Sometimes he fought them—his mouth had

shrivelled into a line above the carelessly shaven chin. More often he gave way and his eyes bore witness to his defeats. I couldn't get his face out of my mind.

The following night, while my host strove with accounts, I went to what is familiarly known as the Legionaries' Café, with a young Frenchman, equally interested in local colour. Of the town I remember little, except a square with shabby trees along one side, and a crowd of Jews in the loveliest clothes I'd ever seen. At least, they seemed to me lovely, for they'd come straight out of Chaucer and the Middle Ages. The married women wore colossal velvet mitres on the top of coiffes. Their sleeves, their veils, their skirts were equally prodigious.

"They came here hundreds of years ago to escape some persecution—I don't remember which—and they haven't changed so much as a pin's head," explained my companion, and I appreciated his vagueness. I didn't want to know why those extraordinary people had chosen to walk out of *Pilgrims' Tales*. That they had done so was a miracle and as such should be left intact.

The café turned out to be a poor affair, huddled between blind houses in the Arab quarter. It was lit by oil-lamps. Their smoke had blackened the ceiling, from which most of the plaster had peeled. Across one end ran a bar, stained with a generation's slops. A blear-eyed Algerian half-caste leaned across it, listening to the gossip of some weedy Arabs without chins or foreheads. When we came in, most of the tables were unoccupied. A gramophone with a broken needle played five-year-old jazz.

We chose the least-battered chairs and asked for a bock and a syrup. It was no use specifying what kind of syrup, because though the colours varied from red and orange to a peculiarly livid green, they all tasted alike.

While my companion talked of Morocco and of the oases to the south, beyond the red Hamada, I looked at the walls, which were covered with dirt and cracked from floor to ceiling. They appeared to be held together by garish cinema posters. "Tiens!" said the Frenchman, breaking off in the



middle of a sentence. "Here is a habitué." Without interest, I glanced at the woman who had come quietly through a side entrance, and then I stared, for she was not all what I expected.

To begin with, she had no paint on her face. I doubted if it was even powdered. Her hat, a hard felt, thoroughly unsuited both to the climate and the circumstances, had obviously belonged to a man and it had come from a good shop. Beneath it, I could see a little hair, brown, with a hint of gold in it, very soft, curling gently at the ends. By the time I'd got over the first shock, the woman had crossed the room as if she didn't see it and seated herself in the corner furthest from the bar. Her feet were bare and thrust into sandals. She was so slight that she had scarcely any shape. Breasts and hips were lost under the faded cotton dress. A little coat that must have formed part of a well-cut flannel suit, hung open. With an untouched glass in front of her and her hands, thin, brown, very young, lying quietly on her knee, she looked at us. And I had a breathless moment when I imagined myself submerged in a tropical sea.

For her eyes were enormous and just that blue between indigo and cobalt which one sees on the Equator. But there was no more to her. I don't remember the brows. The lashes were long and straight, and from those amazing eyes the whole face fell away. It was tender, brown and non-descript, the nose too long, the mouth a trifle drooping. When she smiled at a kitten falling over itself in an attempt to induce a gigantic stag-beetle to play with it, her teeth showed small and white, but unevenly placed, so that they protruded one over the other.

"Who and what is that?" I asked the young Frenchman.

"I haven't the least idea who she is, but they call her Marie, and she comes, I believe, from Algiers. Rumour amuses itself with a father of the most respectable, a lawyer, or even a juge d'instruction. As for what she is, eh bien, tout court, if you permit it, Madame, she belongs to the English brigadier, whom she's followed from one sacré bougre to another for the last five years. Such a devotion! And it

says nothing to the Englishman. He bores himself, that one."

The woman—oh, but she wasn't a woman at all, just a girl in the early twenties, if that—was still looking at the kitten. The tip of her nose hung over the unsatisfactory mouth. There was an undoubted rash upon her chin.

"But isn't she married?" I asked, for she looked as if she ought to have been supported by a perambulator as well as a wedding-ring.

"Not at all," returned the Frenchman.

At that moment a group of Legionaries pushed into the café. Simultaneously, the proprietor appeared at the bar and began to take down bottles from the shelves behind it. Familiar with the ways of the troopers, he knew they would satisfy their thirst and any feelings of conviviality they might have on his rank red wine. Later, when they started to get seriously drunk, they'd shout for anisette.

The Englishman sloped across to the table where Marie sat. She welcomed him gravely and when he flung himself on to a chair, she drew hers closer, leaning towards him and talking in a low voice.

Next to us a Belgian spoke to a man blackened by African service. Coat and shirt were open and a vast amount of tattooing showed upon his chest. "Come here, my old one! No cafard so long as there remain to us sous in our pockets." He tested the strength of a three-legged chair before settling himself astride it.

The man who'd been pointed out to me as a Colonel of the Russian Guard joined them, and soon they were all lapping up the raw wine, which might just as well have been vinegar. They drank with the careless haste of dogs, and the tattooed man, tipping his chair so that it leaned against the wall, smoked a quantity of black cigarettes, sticky as glue. The Russian embarked on the evidently familiar story of his escape, "Seven hundred miles I did on skis with the snow frozen, and only a flask of vodka to keep the soul in my body. . . ."

"What does it matter? What does anything matter?"

retorted the African. He refilled his glass, but the liquor stank. "At this rate I shall vomit before I can get drunk," he said and shouted to the barman, who was spitting into a tumbler as a prelude to rubbing it with the hem of his soiled galabia. "A double anisette, and if I see thee putting methyated into it, I'll twist thy bastard neck!"

The Belgian had been waiting for an opportunity to interrupt the interminable reminiscences of the Slav. "Seest thou that Klems has been condemned by court-martial," he broke in, speaking of a deserter who had joined the Riffs and used stolen French rifles against his own company.

"That is not the way to desert," said a Czech, dragging up a chair. "If one arranges it well, one can have two or three agreeable days at Casablanca before the police, who are, all the same, very good fellows, send one back to the regiment, and then one says it is a coup de tête, and if the officer is a decent sort, he lets one off with a reprimand." He leaned across the table, picked up a bottle and tilted the dregs down his throat.

The Belgian was sucking raw alcohol through a straw to ensure its maximum effect. An old soldier, he told with gusto of men who had deserted and disappeared, to re-enlist a few weeks later, under another name, in the other regiment. "My faith, one had all the fun of the Legion and two 'primes' as well. I assure you that second five hundred francs came in very useful."

They went on talking while the tattooed man emptied and refilled his glass till even the Russian expressed admiration, tintured by surprise. "One sees that you have a head like a three weeks' old egg," he said, "but you must have blown the cash-box, hein?"

The African turned out his pockets and counted their contents. "Another anisette," he demanded, pushing forward a heap of small coins.

The Belgian ceased to take any part in the conversation. Red-faced, he sagged in his chair, an inert but good-tempered mass, while the Czech coolly twisted off one of his

buttons. "That will make my affair," he explained. "I feared the two sides of my tunic would be altogether divorced."

At the next table, a German and a Swede cursed each other. Suddenly one of them seized an empty bottle and smashed the other over the head. The képi broke the blow and next moment the two were at each other's throats. The table went over and the Teuton, a spur caught in the wreckage, lost his footing and crashed on top of it, dragging his opponent with him. The other Legionaries exhibited a certain amount of interest. Bad form it might be to interfere in a strictly personal quarrel, but Sirocco had done its job and most of them were three-parts drunk.

Only the Englishman, making use of his corporal's authority, attempted to separate the combatants who were sprawling among broken glass and tobacco ash. He was, I noticed, dead sober, although he'd drunk enough to put a troop under the table. Deliberately and impartially, he kicked the two who were trying to tear out each other's windpipes. When this failed, he picked up a pepper castor and emptied the whole contents over their faces.

There was a second of thrilled silence. Then an explosion broke from the heap among the table legs. Choking and sneezing, with noses running and water pouring from their eyes, they stumbled to their feet and hurled themselves, blind, at the nearest enemy. The fight became general.

With a whoop of delight, a young trooper who found himself without anybody to hit, threw a bottle at one of the lamps swinging from the ceiling. It burst and the oil caught fire. In a moment some of the posters were ablaze and flames trickled along the floor. There were two doors and my companion acted with promptitude. Before I knew what had happened, he had thrust me through the nearest opening, and was following with something dragging and twisting behind him. "Voyons donc!" he exclaimed crossly, as we found ourselves in the square. "To what good do you wish to burn yourself too?"

Then I saw he'd got hold of Marie and was keeping a

firm grip on her wrist, while she struggled with him, crying, "Let me go—let me go!" followed by an agonised, "Would you wish that I leave him to burn?"

The Frenchman held on till, with a sudden savagery, as awkward as it was inconsistent with her appearance, she bent and bit deep into his hand. Next moment she'd disappeared.

"Well, what d'you think of that?" remarked the young man ruefully.

"We must do something," I said, feebly.

"Agreed, but what?"

We looked at each other in a cloud of sand. "This wind of hell . . ." began the Frenchman, and then the yard leading to the café filled. Troopers, with their tunics torn, poured out of one door, as the military police arrived by another. Marie, pitifully out of place, clung to the English brigadier and was, by him, thrust aside. The gesture was anxious rather than brutal, but the woman recoiled against a wall, staring, wide-eyed, at the scene. It was fantastic enough, with smoke and an occasional spurt of flame in the background, a blanketing of thick yellow fog rent by moonlight, and the clamour of half a dozen languages buffeted by the shrieks of Sirocco.

Ignoring the Frenchman, who murmured, "One has had enough of this, is it not so?" I pushed my way across the yard and told Marie to come with us. I didn't expect her to comply and I was immensely surprised when she followed me, soundless in her sandals.

In the square, with the Frenchman sardonic, for he felt nothing could be flatter than the repetition of a beau geste, I asked the woman where she lived. In the voice of a schoolgirl at her first communion, she answered, "Chez Mère Bonnard." And her eyes looked at me wonderingly. What a pose, I thought, but I knew quite well it was real.

With an occasional remark about the wind, received in dead silence, we attempted to enliven our progress across the "place" and down the blind streets. At the door of a white-washed building, opening into the usual yard, we left our

charge. She extended a limp hand and said, "Thank you . . . thank you very much," while she regarded us gravely. Her enormous eyes wandered past us. She was not in the least interested.

Before turning the corner, we looked back. Marie still stood in the same position. It seemed to me she leaned against the wind. Her inadequate skirt flapped about her legs. I imagined her staring into the sand and pondering what she should do. Her brain worked slowly. One could feel it fumbling for an idea and examining it.

Next day I went west, towards Mauretania. I didn't get as far as I wanted, because the French considered me a responsibility, but I saw more of the Hamada desert and the wadis with their pill-box forts surrounded by barbed wire and even something of the Taffilelt, its independence threatened, as much by the nomad tribes on the south, as by the eagles of France on the north. When I returned to Bou Denib, this time to Mère Bonnard's, where one could get a room for a few francs a week, but no food except a cup of black coffee in the mornings, I met Captain Dumont. He rode soberly, his turban less effective than usual, his face unnaturally grave. Without any flourish, he greeted me, "Madame, there is bad news."

"What?" I asked, visualising a host of "dissidents" mustering in the mountains.

"It is the English brigadier. The man was ill. One saw that he suffered and the storm must have affected his nerves. It was a stroke, you understand, a coup de tête, for which no one can blame him. I only wish he had come to me."

"But what has happened?" I asked.

Sirocco still raged against the cliffs. Towers of sand whirled down the valley, but the force of the wind had spent itself. To-morrow or the next day would be still.

The Captain of Spahis hesitated. Then he spoke slowly, but, in spite of his distress, he couldn't help making the most of the tale. In the middle of the night, the brigadier had taken his rifle, which should have been locked up, and gone out into the yard. With "an exactitude of the most

surprising " he had driven the butt into a heap of stones, wedging it at the requisite angle, which he must have measured as carefully as if it had been a fence at Longchamps. He had then retreated until he felt the wall behind him, opened his tunic and with a grimace, which he imagined a smile, run forward and thrown himself straight onto the bayonet.

The bugler who sounded the reveille found him spitted like a capon. For fully thirty seconds the boy had stared at the grim spectacle. Then dropping his instrument, for he was a lad fresh joined, " with all his past in front of him," he'd rushed to the nearest hut and shouted his tale to half-dressed men who were considering whether to wash.

This much the captain told in a vast number of words, so that the brigadier's suicide became sonorous and portentous as the death of Priam in the *Iliad*.

Then he changed his tone. " Madame," he said simply, " you must not blame the Legion. It is a good life for men who have nothing to regret. The loneliness of which they speak is not what they find in Africa; where there are good comrades and plenty of movement, but what they bring with them from the countries they've forfeited. We ask no questions and in return we expect loyal service, but we cannot stop men thinking. Enfin, if they are imaginative, they make comparisons, but here there is a chance of a career to take the place of a family. Half my sous-officiers are foreigners and these days any trooper can rise to command a company." The little man ceased his discourse as suddenly as he had begun it. " In the Legion, Madame, one must be simple. One cannot live in two worlds at once."

At Mère Bonnard's I asked for Marie and was told the number of her room. Like mine, it opened on to a mud porch which ran the whole length of the yard. A few plants struggled out of the sand. An almond tree leaned over the wall.

I wrote a letter and tore it up. There was nothing I could do, but I scribbled a few words and thrust them under the door, after which I avoided the porch. She should, at least,

have privacy, but towards evening we met in the deserted corridor.

The woman's face hadn't changed. It was young, defenceless and dry-eyed. But every vestige of colour had left it. "I'm glad," she said. "Glad, d'you understand?" and then the fierceness died out of her. She drooped in front of me, with no more substance than a rag. I took her by the arm and led her into the porch. I pushed her into a chair and offered her a cigarette.

"No," she said. "I don't smoke."

Then she told me about the car which had come over the Atlas a few days ago. She hadn't seen it, so she drew freely on her imagination and since this was limited, what she would have made splendid, became pathetically commonplace. The car had contained a man "of the utmost importance," and a woman "no doubt beautiful," but she'd been heavily veiled, so nobody had seen her face. They'd asked for the Englishman by a name which no one recognised. After some misunderstanding, they found him and took him away on the road to the mountains. When he came back, he wouldn't say a word.

Robbed of the atmosphere which Marie contrived, in spite of her poor command of language, the tale was reduced to the fact that an old man and a woman, veiled against the dust, had arrived in a big car and taken the brigadier for a drive, after which he'd been rather more surly than usual.

"But," said Captain Dumont, discussing the incident later that evening, "I spoke with them myself. Without doubt they were most distinguished people."

The Spahi had come to Mère Bonnard's on the excuse of offering me a mount while I remained in Bou Denib, but really to tell me of his argument with the colonel. For the little captain had determined to bury his brigadier with full military honours and the commanding officer had protested, "D'you want to encourage suicides?"

Dumont's face grew rounder and redder as he gave me his version of the conversation. "Did I not say to the



colonel straight out, à l'Anglais, 'Mon Commandant, do not mention that word to me, for, with my own eyes, I saw how the poor fellow had fallen over his rifle while he attended to a horse. . . .' You will understand there was no horse, but me, I was prepared to support one good lie with many bad ones. Enfin, the colonel, who is a brave man, gave way. 'It is your affair, but one cannot say it is a good example.' "

By this time, the cavalryman was damp, hot and scarlet, for his collar throttled him, and in mending the seam of his right boot, the local cobbler had made it unpleasantly tight, but he finished the story triumphantly. " 'Enfin, Mon Commandant,' I said, 'the poor fellow did not find such paradise in Africa that we need deny him the chance of one upstairs.' "

"Quite right," I agreed, wondering if the brigadier would have been amused and how it would strike his mistress. She was a most unexpected person.

With Marie, I went to the funeral. She took it for granted that I would come. She just said, "It'll be very early. Will you wake, or shall I knock at your window?" I offered her a sedative and suggested I should do the knocking, but she wouldn't hear of it.

Before sunrise we went across the wadi. I had put on an old black suit. My companion showed no signs of mourning. Her legs were a lovely brown between the gay stripes of her skirt and those lamentable sandals. Her face was empty, like the face of a child who has cried itself dumb, and like a child she didn't expect anything from the world of grown-ups.

In silence we watched the procession file out of the fort. The coffin, covered with the flag for which the brigadier had fought, was carried by six troopers. Behind came the dead man's horse and his dog, a brown-and-white mongrel with setter blood. The squadron followed. Beside the unwallled cemetery, swept by the blast of Sirocco, they formed a hollow square.

A bugle called. The air was very clear and drenched in

that green light which precedes the dawn. Slowly, the coffin disappeared. Round the open grave, the Legionaries stood at attention, their rifles reversed, while Dumont, his sincerity struggling with his sense of drama, addressed the dead. "Mon camarade," he said. "Whatever crime thou has committed in life, thou hast not the right to deprive a mother of the privilege of mourning her son. We do not ask thy secrets. Rest thou in peace and in the gratitude of France, but let thy grave be the object of a family's reverence and grief." False sentiment, I thought, for nobody knew the brigadier's name, so how could anyone weep upon his tomb—except Marie, of course. I looked at her and saw, for the first and only time in my life, I think, a sorrow irreconcilable with tears.

Dumont made rapid use of his handkerchief. I saw, or imagined, moisture in the eyes of troopers, wind-scarred and sun-blackened, waifs from war-wrecked Central Europe, fugitives from her prisons, blond adventurers from the north. But the woman beside me, with head held high, looked as if she didn't know where she was, or what it was all about.

Silence followed the captain's peroration. Then, to the surprise of everybody, a Legionary stepped from the ranks. Dragging a book from his pocket, he said with shy simplicity, "My Captain, I am a Lutheran pastor and I have here my office. Will you permit that I read it over our comrade?"

Dumont nodded, and the man, who looked as if he should have been wielding a rake in Swiss meadows, stood bare-headed by the grave. He was no longer a trooper, ill at ease and stiff, but a minister of his faith. The prayers rolled grandly from his lips. He turned the tattered pages, but did not look at them. There was no limit to his assurance, no compromise of any sort. The ambassador of a Supreme Power spoke to a subject who had served the throne.

Unconsciously, heads went up. I no longer wanted to cry.

"I don't know."

I wondered if that indefinite mouth could be obstinate. The eyes dreamed. They held a constant, gentle surprise.

Before we went to bed, I'd forced some notes into her unwilling hands and arranged to take her to Algeria. There happened to be a spare seat in the ramshackle car I'd hired from an Arab.

But when the day of departure arrived and the driver, unshaved, his shirt fastened with string, was making a great fuss about my luggage, Marie could not be found. Madame Bonnard threw up her hands and eyes. Her breasts shook under the greasy bodice. Mademoiselle had paid her bill. That was certain. One had only to look at her room to be assured of its emptiness.

I went north alone.

A year later my francs were returned to me with two words in a widely looped writing.

I never saw Marie again, unless, well unless. . . . For not long ago, I lunched at the Negresco Hotel in Nice. To me it is like a railway station, confused with the furniture department of a modern store. There was, as usual, too much of everything, including food, scent and the dullest people. But at the next table a family party, immersed in black, applied themselves determinedly to their meal. They were pleasant to look at, partly because they were so thoroughly enjoying themselves. Prosperous bourgeois, I thought, celebrating the will of a rich relation. Maman was portly, with chin supported on a cutlet frill and a wide good-tempered smile dividing her face into half moons. Papa's moustache became entangled in the lobster and he licked it with relish. He wore a ring on his tie and another, larger, on a square and sensible hand. The children were charming. They whispered to each other, very serious. Black bows flared all over them. It was only when they got up and sorted themselves to leave the room, that I noticed the governess. She must have been the governess. The smallest girl, with the head of a medieval page and a chessboard of a frock, took her hand familiarly and smiled

at her. There was a murmur of "Mademoiselle, this—Mademoiselle, that. . . ." To which a careless voice answered, "Yes, Madame, I have it. No, Madame, one left it in the car."

For a moment, I looked into eyes that held the blue of the Equator and a gentle, still bewilderment. "You! My dear. . . ." I exclaimed, half upsetting my chair, but the woman showed no sign of recognition. Bending to the children, arranging a bow with a pollen-covered hand and the suggestion that she didn't quite know what she was doing and it didn't matter any way, she passed out of the restaurant. Could it have been Marie?

## HAREM KALEIDOSCOPE

### *Tunisia, Syria and Tripoli*

IN Tunisia I stayed with the wife of a learned Sheikh who taught jurisprudence at a college with a roof that looked as if it had been steeped in sea water. The house was at the very edge of the town. By climbing on to a pile of boxes— forbidden, of course, for women should not look beyond their own affairs—I could see over the parapet into the court of the Medersa with its fountain and the students sitting cross-legged, their noses glued to the works of the eighth-century Abu Hanifa ibn Thabat. I could also see an expanse of hard red clay, the tomb of a saint, and some half-hearted vegetation that strove to be a garden.

The Sheikh had one wife, called Khadija, whose sole ambition was to bear a healthy son. She was not certain of her age, but thought it might be about twenty-five. She'd been married ten years and had given birth to nearly as many children. All but one had died in infancy. The last was a miserable scrap of humanity and the pivot of the entire household. I remember the days as punctuated by his wails, and our garments as being continually sticky because the child was always eating locusts soaked in honey and wiping himself upon the nearest material. When the wails gathered more volume than usual, a woman would rush at him, pull up his satin robe and play with that portion of his anatomy which distinguished him from herself.

In spite of her cloistered life and the sorrows that isolated her from the other women, Khadija had an unyielding personality. She ruled the household and stood up to her

husband when she thought it worth while. She was tall and slight, with fine features. Her eyes were deeply sunk and her face showed the lines of age, but the arms covered with heavy bracelets retained the firmness and the curves of youth. She wore a turban of bright silks and ear-rings in the shape of flowers, crescents and the hands of Fatima. Her dresses fell from neck to heel in splendid folds, which rustled as she moved. She'd been educated at a French school, but she hadn't the slightest desire to leave the house which represented the best of her life.

"What is there outside?" she asked. "I have loved my lord and he has loved me. My life should be in our children, but the French doctor says I have had too many. They die like flies and I have no strength now to give them. It is the custom of our family that we marry our cousins. Always it has been so, but the ferangi<sup>1</sup> says it is wrong."

We were sitting on the roof, but there was no view. The high parapet shut out everything except the sky. In one corner, a slave bent over a family of coffee-pots. The largest, pelican-beaked, with a huge swollen belly, must have contained a gallon. Khadija looked round to see that the pasty-faced Mohamed was within reach, and anxiety contracted her brows. "I cannot keep the women from feeding him," she said. "They stuff anything into his mouth. . . ."

At that moment he was stuffing himself with what seemed to be a mixture of flies, dust and molasses, but his mother did not interfere. "It is time the Sheikh took another wife . . ." she said wearily.

"You would not mind?"

"Why should I? My Lord must have sons, and when Marufa has gone, I shall need companionship. It is not good to be alone, hour after hour with servants."

The Sheikh's sister, Marufa, was to be married within a few days to a man reported by the matchmakers to be young, a good rider, and the possessor of a "beard fine as silk and smelling of amber." The girl of fifteen appeared to find the information sufficient. The only thing she regretted

<sup>1</sup> Foreigner.

was the bridegroom's lack of relations. He had neither mother nor sisters. So she, also, would be alone, but she was taking with her a slave adept in fortune-telling and the game of knucklebones. And she was not educated like Khadija. So except when her limbs ached for want of exercise and she screamed for Akhleya to come and massage them, she seemed to be content with what lay in front of her.

Khadija, seated on a stool, her hawk profile outlined against the wall, continued, "It is I who must choose another wife for my lord, somebody I know, who will be a friend to me, but she must be young and of different blood, and that will be difficult. . . ." Her thoughts returned to the boy, whom she regarded with love and shame. "He is so small . . ." she said, and picked him up, crushing him against her still splendid body.

I stayed for the wedding. A terrific amount of noise came from the room where the men feasted. Tumult raged in the harem. A crowd of women had clattered up the earthen stairs on high heels, with a rattle of anklets. Discarding their haiks<sup>1</sup> they disposed themselves on mats and hard couches to smoke and eat vast quantities of meat, rice and sweet-stuffs, to discuss the bride and bridegroom's physical attributes, to drink endless cups of coffee and between whiles let forth quivers of ecstasy that seemed to roll up the backs of their throats and vibrate against their palates. Slaves swung perfumed censers and splashed scent over their clothes. Smoke poured from a brazier. The bride, a bundle of scarlet silk with one robe superimposed upon another and a girdle knotted seven times in order to delay the ardour of her groom, or to prevent the jinns anticipating him, sat alone, behind a sheet hung from the ceiling. Food and drink were passed in to her. Sometimes a woman pushed head and shoulders beyond the screen and whispered. At last, when everybody showed signs of exhaustion, a servant ran up the stairs shaking with excitement. The guests seized anything that lay handy and made pretence of veiling themselves. Sturdy footsteps sounded on the

<sup>1</sup> Outer garment worn by Moslem women.

landing. A man wrapped in a woman's haik came in and, without glancing at the assembled company, went straight to the sheet and lifted a corner of it. As soon as he'd dropped it behind him, everybody began to clap. The sound of their hands and their gurgles of rejoicing effectively covered any sound the bride may have made. I watched the sheet, but it did not move.

In less than three minutes the man slipped out. Ignoring our presence, he went to the door, where Khadija gave him money, dates and a bowl of sour milk.

"What does that mean?" I asked the nearest woman.

"It always happens," she said. "At just this time a man of a special family where the privilege is hereditary, goes in to the bride. Nobody knows what he does."

"But you have been married. You must know," I interrupted.

She looked at me with the "closed" expression familiar in the harem. "No, I do not know."

Later I asked Khadija. She said: "It is nothing . . . a custom, but secret. We may not talk about it."

When news came that the bridegroom waited, every woman in the room made a rush at the sheet. It fell and was trampled underfoot. Everyone pulled and pushed to get hold of the scarlet bundle, veiled now and presumably half stifled by the amount of material heaped upon it. The sturdiest lifted Marufa as if she'd been a parcel and as such, she bumped up and down upon a dozen different shoulders. I thought she would certainly be dropped on the stairs, but, somehow, the crowd forced their way down. With shrill quivers, they thrust Marufa into a vehicle not unlike a four-poster on wheels. Khadija and various small children clambered in afterwards, and with music, shouting and an occasional rifle-shot, the procession started for the bridegroom's house.

Arrived there, the girl was lifted out, carried across the threshold and into the bridal chamber, where she was dumped unceremoniously in the middle of a bed. Then the women withdrew, leaving the room in darkness. In some



cases the bridegroom is already hidden behind a curtain and he comes out as soon as the door closes. In others he goes to the bride accompanied by his vizier, the best man, and if the girl struggles, or makes a pretence of doing so, they tie her hands to her legs, or behind her back. The bride always shrieks and exhibits every sign of hysteria, lest it be supposed that she is glad to leave her father's house.

I remember Marufa would hardly consent to be left on the highly decorated bed with a pile of bolsters in frilled chemises. She clutched and clawed at the slaves who were arranging her robes, and her sobs followed us down the passage.

The mother-in-law, a dignified woman who spoke French, led us into a narrow room with windows high up under the ceiling. It contained too much furniture, including three brass bedsteads. I counted eleven mirrors, fifteen clocks. We sat round a coffee-hearth and, half astounded by scent, smoke and the smell of warm flesh, prepared to wait until the bridegroom had performed his part of the marriage ceremony. I wondered what he would make of the seven knots. They had been firmly tied.

Some of the older women dozed. The others drank sweet syrups and whispered. A cock stalked about, ruffling its feathers and pecking at the almond cakes. "What is it doing here?" I asked, surprised, and Khadija murmured, "It is a custom—lest it be necessary to save the face of the bride's family, but Marufa is a virgin. Thanks be to Allah, there will be no reason to kill the cock."

The minutes dragged. The women began to protest. "He is slow! Is he only half a man?"

A bowl of water was sent to the bridal chamber as a hint that the groom lingered too long. "The quicker he is," murmured Khadija, "the more we respect him. But he must leave at once. Such is our law. After to-night, he may stay with his bride till the first hour of the morning. Then the old women fetch him out, lest the girl be too tired."

A sound came from the adjacent room and in a minute

the women were on their feet. In the passage the bridegroom passed us, the hood of his burnouse drawn over his face.

Marufa lay in the middle of the garish bed showing, as is proper, every sign of exhaustion. With cries of delight, the women surrounded her. They bathed her forehead and massaged her limbs. Her drawers were stripped and exhibited to the company, after which they became the property of Khadija, who would lay them on a cushion where for some days they would bear witness to the virginity of Marufa.

"Wallahi!" muttered the mother-in-law. "Would I have accepted the girl, had there been any need of the cock."

Among some nomad tribes the groom places a pair of slippers under the bride, and these are subsequently hung up at the opening of the tent. But generally, after a Bedouin wedding, a new sheepskin, taken from the couch, flies its scarlet banner among the carpets and embroideries which decorate the place.

Khadija and I drove back to the house at the edge of the town. The woman's eyes were so much older than her years. "Ai-ee," she said. "I shall be lonely."

"You have the Sheikh. His love for you is well known, and in many things he depends upon your judgment."

Khadija showed surprise. "How can a male be a companion?" she said. "There is one life for men and another for women, and they are separate as the two blades of a scissor when it is stretched open."

Such was my acquaintance with Khadija, a woman who looked life squarely in the face. For such as her, polygamy offers the only possible relief from annual child-bearing and an enforced isolation among women whose ignorance is only equalled by the superstitions inherited from negroid ancestors.

In the black "houses of hair" belonging to the Bedouins, it is no rare occurrence for a Sheikh's wife to force her way into the men's council and demand that her husband should take another spouse. I once heard a girl of twenty, the

mother of three children, appeal to the paramount chief of the tribe. He was sitting surrounded by his warriors with the flaps of the great tent turned back. "I am not a camel," she cried, "or a mare to bear this burden yearly, yet a Sheikh of Anneiza must have sons. Let my husband take another wife, so that the tribe be enriched by menfolk and my strength somewhat spared to me."

But it is as impossible to generalise about harems as it would be to compare Esquimaux with Negroes, or savage London with the arcadia of the Trobrian Islanders. For there is more difference between the life of the Bedouin, his horizon bounded by war, water and sandstorms, and the sophisticated merchants of the Mediterranean who make the pilgrimage to Paris instead of Mecca, than between a beachcomber and the newest prince of commerce throned in Park Lane.

So this kaleidoscope, consisting of brilliantly coloured fragments, shows only a thousand-thousandth part of the whole, for the harem in some form or other comprises the life of one-sixth of the female world.

Between the deserts of Nejd and the plain of Hauran, clouded with locusts, lies the mountain of the Druses. This hardy, obstinate, self-sufficient people have long been supposed to worship the Golden Calf. In reality, they use a bull's head instead of the Christian lamb, as an emblem of the One God. For they are unitarians, believing in reincarnation and a heaven which will materialise when the founder of their faith, the tenth-century Caliph Hakim, reappears as the long-awaited saviour of the world. For the rest, their religion is a secret and one of the few that has been kept.

No steeples or minarets break the monotony of Sueida's dark houses, piled among the rocks, one on top of another like the cells of a honeycomb. Men and women, the latter seated behind a curtain, may attend service in the megliss<sup>1</sup> and listen to a reading from one of the seven holy books, but only the initiates know where the secret rites take place.

When I first visited Sueida, long ago, I stayed in the house

<sup>1</sup> Council or council hall.

of El Atrash, whose great warrior, Sultan, was subsequently exiled for making war upon the French. I remember it as a grim castle, stone built, the floors blackened with the grease of sheep killed and roasted to feed the guests of the Druse chieftain. Even in the harem there was little furniture. We slept on stone couches covered with mats of grass. But the women were resplendent in embroidered jackets. Their full skirts were bunched over a number of bright petticoats and belted high under the bust with silver-studded leather. They wore curious metal caps, the shape of a baking-tin, under a mass of white stuff which they wound across their faces, revealing a solitary eye.

There was one among them who had no use for the harem. Older than anything living in the mountain, she went where she chose and no man argued with her, for she was the grandmother and great-grandmother of the Atrash warriors. They came to her for counsel, bending to kiss her skirt, or her hands withered as the claws of an eagle. And they stood before her, great bearded men in camels'-hair cloaks, with rifles across their backs. They were laden with cartridge belts and pistols and gold-handled daggers, but they talked in low voices, humble as the youngest jawil<sup>1</sup> who has not yet killed his enemy.

The Sitt Zeinab was a very remarkable personage. The majority of harem women cling together, loyal to their secret alliance against the men, but the mother of the Atrash clan despised her own sex. She sat in the great hall of the castle, muffled to the eyes in her black robes. From the stone platform where she crouched, lean and proud as a hawk, she could survey the men of her family and their guests, could call to them in a shrill, clear voice before which they bowed as corn in the wind, and could send the servants hurrying with an imperious gesture that suggested the drawing of a dagger.

Sometimes, when the men lounged round the coffee-hearth with its regiment of beakers, she would scramble up to the women's tower. She would establish herself in the

<sup>1</sup> The fighting class.

window overlooking the heaped houses and the well where the girls dawdled, making great play with one eye. Then she would talk to me about the customs of the mountain. No Druse, she said, may marry outside his own people.

No initiate, distinguished from the warriors as much by his dignity of manner as by the heavy black robe and hard turban, may revealed the first word of the Druse ritual—and live. When a girl marries, she presents her husband with a dagger for which she has made a red silk cover. If she is unfaithful, he sends her back to her family with the weapon unsheathed. It is they who must use it. Father or brother may kill a maid on the very suspicion that she has forfeited her chastity. And the ancient lady, Zeinab, from whose womb sprang the fighting strength of the mountain, upheld the law, "For the Druse blood must remain pure. A woman is the vessel which carries the wine of our race. If the cup is cracked and the contents spilled, what use is it except for the rubbish heap?"

At that moment, I thought of her as an old eagle blinking in the sun, caged by the bars across the window, but the next moment she was on the wing and ready to strike. For an ear-splitting scream came from an adjacent room. Sounds of conflict followed. The Sitt Zeinab swept across the mats, erect, her blue eyes flashing, her nose like the hooked beak of a bird.

The door burst open and a surprising sight met our eyes. In the middle of a group of women, all more or less dishevelled, one strove and shrieked with the strength of the insane. "She is possessed!" gasped a sober middle-aged dame, trying to rearrange her veil.

The Sitt Zeinab cast one glance at the cause of the disturbance. "To the yard with her!" she ordered. "To the collar!"

Nobody thought of disobeying. The distraught creature was dragged, by way of a winding stair and many corridors, to an outhouse where, prone upon the floor, her neck bolted into an iron collar attached to a staple between the stones, she was left to recover from her hysterics. "The devil

which is in her will soon get tired. He will leave her when he can no longer amuse himself freely in her body," explained the great-grandmother of fighting men.

I returned to Sueida after the disastrous war which had demolished the Druse stronghold and exiled in a waterless desert the handful of warriors who remained. I found the fortress of El Atrash in ruins, but the Sitt Zeinab unchanged. On that occasion I slept with several women in a room with only three walls. Piles of stones littered the passage outside. A hole gaped in the roof. The sentence that had become the bitter watchword of the family passed from lip to lip, "A house which cannot defend its own, is worthily destroyed." For it was by his rescue of a guest seized by the French that Sultan, "the killer," precipitated that ridiculous and splendid war in which a handful of mountaineers, armed only with rifles, defied the whole might of France, pitting their chivalry against the science of destruction.

But the little Nazira did not trouble about the past. She had other occupations. Unfortunately she was engaged to an "akil,"<sup>1</sup> a worthy man whom she disliked because he was so serious. Seated on a straw mat, with stones to lean against, she told me, "An akil may only fight in defence of his country, but I want to marry a warrior, beautiful, with plaited hair and kohol on his lids. . . ." Her face became ecstatic. She was round and rosy, with cornflower eyes, careless with her veil, which she let drop when a personable man came within sight.

"Is it not better to marry a learned man respected by the French, rather than a young firebrand who, at any moment, may jeopardise everything he possesses?"

Nazira sucked the end of one of her braids. She was scarcely more than a child and bubbling over with vitality. "An akil is too little a man," she said. "Has he not passed all the trials of the flesh. . . ."

"What d'you mean?" I interrupted. Nazira's eyes grew rounder as she told me, in colourful phrases and at great length, how, before a man could be initiated into the

<sup>1</sup> One of the initiates, as distinguished from a "jawil" or warrior.

mysteries of the Druse faith, he must starve for sixty hours and then sit through a banquet without touching food. He must ride for as long in the desert without water and on his return refuse to drink. Excited with wine and spices, he must spend a night with some gipsy, or dancing girl, specially chosen for her proficiency in the art of love and resist her advances.

"And if he fails?" I asked.

"There is nothing," said Nazira. "The Ajawids say to him, 'It is no slight thing to be a lion among the fighting men,' but they do not reveal to him 'the knowledge.'"

"I see, and if he succeeds?"

"He is akil, learned, such as Hasan whom I must marry, but only half male, for should a man resist when a woman calls to him?" Nazira covered her face to hide the colour which burned from chin to brow.

Thereafter, I saw little of her until one evening she was dragged into the great hall where the Sitt Zeinab sat on a stone couch. A dozen men, wrapped in their cloaks, for the wind drove through the damaged walls, drank coffee and warmed themselves over the hearth. Naphtha lamps, swinging from chains, cast shadows which leaped from one place to another, and a torch flared red in the corner.

The youth who held Nazira, struggling, by the wrist, had long hair which fell across his brow and an armoury of weapons about his person. Man and girl talked equally fast. One by one, the women crept into the hall and stood apart, their veils held between their teeth. The coffee-drinkers put down their cups. Their hands disappeared into their sleeves.

In so short a time the rough hall, where men dreamed of revenge and an old woman whispered of the means, became a court. Nazira had been surprised in the arms of a peasant, a man of no birth, not actually one of "the grey-faced" who till the earth without bearing arms or knowing how to ride on a raid, but a stranger who should not so much as have seen her eyes.

Denial died on the girl's lips. She wept and shuddered.

Her father rose from the half-circle, but I thought he hesitated. Then the ancient chieftainess, ninety years old and more, left her seat. She drew the dagger from her grandson's belt and put it into his hand. The other women pressed back against the wall, covering their faces. The Sitt Zeinab remained erect. "My sons and my sons' sons, and their sons who were but scarce grown, have died for our race. Their blood is not yet dry on these stones. Would you, a girl, undo the work of warriors? Be thankful that you also can die. . . ." I understood those words, but as Zeinab's voice quickened and burned, I lost the rest.

Nazira hung limp at the end of her father's arm. He pulled her out of the room as if she'd been a sack. In the other hand he held the dagger. I heard a scream, and I heard nothing else. The man returned, wiping the blade against his sleeve and resumed his place in the circle by the hearth.

At that time Sultan el Atrash, hero of the mountain, mighty warrior and despot, was in exile some hundreds of miles away in the desert between Azraq and Nejd. In order to visit him, I left Amman before daybreak by "the secret road"—a gully where the boulders were as thick as pebbles. During the first hour we covered six miles. Later we debouched on to the plains where Beni Sakhr pasture vast herds of camel, sheep and goats. We left them for a waste of black stones. All day we drove without sign of a track. In the wadis, tufted with brittle grey scrub, mirage made boats, battlements and towers. Our wheels left no mark on the hard ground and, towards sunset, the inevitable happened. We lost the way. The Arab driver hesitated till the Druse who was supposed to guide us seized him by the throat. Fearful altercation followed. We progressed in circles, stopping to climb hillocks from which we could see nothing but desert.

At last, in the middle of a deafening quarrel, with the Bedouin predicting death at the hands of Ibn Saoud's Wahabis, and the Arab shivering over the recollection of a jinn which had tried to cut his throat in a similar wilderness,



we saw black tents in the one direction where both had agreed they could not possibly be.

Sultan el Atrash welcomed us warmly. Over bitter coffee and a sparse meal, we talked politics. Later, I went behind the tasselled, woollen curtain which shut off the women's quarters. There I found a girl of twenty-three, fair-skinned, with blue eyes.

Outside, stretched the desolation of sand and sapless scrub. Within were beds made of a few rugs, with camel saddles for pillows. The girl, whose sons had been left in the mountain, watched me while I took off my boots. "Tell me," she said, "why do your people make war on women?" and she described how, Sueida in ruins and scarcely a warrior unwounded, they had fled from the mountain with neither water nor food. In the last stages of exhaustion, they'd reached a well within the borders of Trans-Jordan and been driven from it by British rifles. "We Arabs would not refuse water to a beast," concluded the girl. "It is against honour and humanity, but you foreigners are savages. Wherever you go, there is murder and—Allah forbid it—I may never again see my sons."

"All could return to their homes in the mountain except Sultan Pasha and some few. . . ." I mentioned the leaders proscribed for what the Druses regarded as a holy war, destined to free their land from French dominion.

The girl, so pale and thin she might have been a ghost, drew her tattered robe across her breasts and folded her arms on top of it. "We do not desert our own people," she said. "How can some go back and leave others in the desert?" I remembered my horror at Sitt Zeinab's judgment. Here was her great-grandchild regarding me as a barbarian.

I met another remarkable woman in the castle of Ba-Idris. This feudal stronghold, set in a valley some forty miles from Mosul, belongs to the High Priest of Satan. He is a tall lean man, with a shaven head and a beard, long, pointed, black, just the right type of beard for his reputation among the ignorant. He is called Said Beg and he is Mir,

or chief, of the Yezidis, a peaceful and pastoral people sworn to serve the devil for ten thousand years. His mother, said to be the only woman among the Yezidis who can read and write, received me in a large square hall, with walls of mud. She wore a brilliant red dress, very full in the skirt, under a trailing black drapery, the end of which covered her head. She was spare and strong like her son, with a face the colour of walnuts and a skin as creased. Her eyes were very bright and her hair a shining black, for she'd rubbed it with some sort of grease. I never heard her called anything but the Lady Mother of the Mir, and she behaved as such, ruling her soft-voiced son, his wives, his household and his people with an authority which no one questioned.

A servant brought water and scent. Then the formidable dame led me upstairs. While I still blinked in the dimness of a chamber filled with young women, she noticed the colour of my scarf and asked me to remove it. For blue is holy because it is the colour of water and of the peacock's wings.

When I had disposed of the sacred object, several wives were introduced to me. They were pale-skinned, with almond-shaped eyes, and their dresses of furious reds and yellows reminded me of the wide skirts of English villagers. Gold and silver necklaces covered their breasts.

"My son has been married five times," explained my hostess, "and this is the youngest." She pulled forward a girl of perhaps fourteen as if she'd been an obstreperous goat and held her so that I could have a good look at her.

At that moment the Mir entered. He couldn't have been less like the usual conception of the Devil's Vicegerent, lord of evil from China to the Mediterranean. His khaki coat suggested the trenches, his robe an operating theatre and his lace skull-cap the sort of hair-net worn by gigolos when motoring. He smiled at his wives with the air of an indulgent father who might at any moment pull sweets out of his pocket. So I asked him if the peasants whom I'd seen toiling among grain, olives and mulberries, indulged in a similar plurality of spouses. If so, how did they all fit into

the earthen houses scattered like pill-boxes between the crops, or huddled, square and flat, below the castle.

The Mir replied, "With you, women have much power, so one wife is more than enough, but with us, they have no power at all, so they take what is prepared for them and are content."

I looked at his mother, straight as a spear, with arrogance in every line of her, but she was too sure of herself to answer.

The younger women busied themselves with the supervision of a meal. Servants attempted to force a table through the narrow door. There was anxious whispering and a great deal of consultation as to the correct arrangement of food and cutlery. Then a huge platter was carried in and the Mir invited me to sit with his mother and himself. He broke joints from a sheep, roasted whole, and piled them on my plate. The lady helped me simultaneously to pilau and sour milk. While her son sat silent, she told me about the Yezidis. Like the Christians they baptise, like the Moslems they circumcise, like the Abyssinian Copts they ensure the virginity of maidens with needle and thread, so that the bridegroom must use a knife. Like the Jews they eat not those animals which chew the cud or part the hoof, but they won't eat a cock either because of his resemblance to their sacred emblem, or a gazelle because its eyes are like those of Sheikh Adi, founder and prophet of the sect, or a fish out of compliment to Jonah, or certain vegetables favoured by the pea-fowl.

The Lady Mother paused from want of breath and I replied in careful Arabic, because I knew I must not use any word rhyming with Shaitan (the devil), or any beginning with the first letters of Satan's name.

When we had indicated our pleasure in the meal and emphasised the fullness of our stomachs by loud belching, it became evident that I was to share a mattress with the Lady of the house. The others withdrew, the Mir wishing me rest in the name of Melek Taus, the angel peacock, emblem of Satan, to whom, according to the Yezidis, the

Lord of All has handed over the world for a period which has still 4,000 years to run.

A servant brought water in which we rinsed our mouths, spitting it into a bowl, for water must never be spilled upon the ground, or otherwise wasted. The Lady Mother then removed her black drapery and wound it round her feet. Moonlight crept through an unglazed window. A clear, almost colourless, flame burned in a dish of oil set in a niche. "Will you sleep, my friend?" invited the Lady. Under such circumstances, an Arab woman would say "my sister," in order to emphasise her responsibility towards a guest in her house. But the Yezidi believes himself inhuman, so he calls no man "brother." The Black Book explains the devil-worshippers' descent from Adam and a mysterious dark lady brought to him by Satan. Eve's jealousy prevented any connection between the two, but their seed, buried in pots underground, gave birth to a boy and a girl. These were the ancestors of the farmers whom one sees riding through Jebel Sinjar and in the Kurdish Valleys near Ain Sefni. Slenderer editions of the bullmen sculptured on Assyrian pylons, with black curling hair and beards, they wear gaily striped waistcoats, prodigious sashes and trousers with the capacity of tents. They ride horses, or donkeys with equally brilliant saddlecloths and fringed bridles. In the name of the devil they give hospitality to whoever asks, but they do not marry outside their own sect. Throughout the centuries, they have died as martyrs for a faith that knows no renegades and they inflict the death penalty for any breach of the law which is part of their religion.

"But we do not expect a similar virtue of others," said the Lady Mother, yawning, and indeed the worshippers of Satan, for whom the peacock takes the place of the Christian cross, the Zoroastrian fire and the Moslems' black stone in the Ka-aba at Mecca, extend their tolerance to every creed. "Much killing has been done in the name of God," said my hostess, settling her head upon a bolster, "but none under the wing of Melek Taus."

A moment later she slept. Her lips, strongly carved, with definite edges, remained closed, but snores trumpeted through her nose.

In the morning, I rode to Sheikh Adi, temple of the Devil. Its delightful, stone-built courts were shaded with trees and thronged with pilgrims. A carved serpent guarded the door of the shrine. I touched it and the black came off on my fingers. "It is the best boot polish bought in Mosul, but English, I think," explained the High Priest, while a delicious person, mixture of Father Christmas and Aladdin, brought sacred oil burning in a ladle. He urged me to put my hand into it, assuring me it would not burn, but I daren't risk it.

With the Mir, we passed through the long nave and, bare-footed, entered the Holy of Holies, where Sheikh Adi lies in a wooden sarcophagus. We went down into the caverns under the temple where rumour has it that the most abominable rites take place, but I saw neither altar nor flame, only dripping rocks and the pulse of a spring which swirled round our feet. In pursuit of legend, I climbed into the fluted tower, from which the priests of Satan are supposed to spread their spells. And I found a simple "qawal," fifth in the hierarchy of seven who serve the peacock king, intoning a litany of the dead. As the corpse had been his spiritual brother, he wore its clothes and had doubtless breakfasted upon the food which it would have eaten had it been alive. In return for such favours he had buried it with his own hands and was now reciting a list of the dead man's virtues to propitiate the Lord of Evil. Interrupting his discourse to beam upon us, he offered me a handful of mulberries and blessed me with the sign of Satan.

Back again at Ba-Idris, I found the Lady Mother idle in the hall. The Mir had left suddenly for a frontier village. And the woman in her red robe, the colour of blood, said to me as if it were a chant, "In life, our family has been blessed. The best lands are theirs and the loveliest women to wife. All that they need is heaped before them. But in death they are less considered than the animals. My husband's

father and his father also died by the knife. How long will the knife spare my son ? ”

Down through the rice-fields I rode. Oleanders bloomed between the rocks. Blossom carpeted the hillside and broke into foam beside the stream. An enormous tassel swung from the nose of my ass, whiter than milk. But I thought of the woman I'd just left. I imagined her standing in the fire-blackened hall, proud and afraid, while she counted on those lean fingers of hers, for, in eleven hundred years, scarce a dozen Mirs have died a natural death.

In the hills near Syrian Tripoli I spent a few days with the wife of a great and learned Sheikh, chief of the Whirling Dervishes. The Melewi believe that soul and body are equally divine. So they seek in the rhythm of the dance that superlative harmony in which the man of God is beyond good or evil.

Part of the harem was furnished in European fashion. There were brass bedsteads and chairs upholstered in pink. Almond trees flowered on the terrace. A fountain spurted into a tiled basin. From the roof we had a view of rocks and trees descending to the bed of a stream. An arched bridge led towards the city. Behind us, a dome swelled above the heterogeneous collection of buildings, palace, mosque and castle.

I don't know what I'd expected in the Grand Master of the Melewi—an ascetic, I suppose, worn with fasting and meditation. But he resembled nothing so much as a tree on his own mountain-side. For his sixty years meant nothing to him. Grey-bearded, rugged and strong, he moved about his courts and terraces, shouting for his servants in a great voice and eating prodigiously at every meal.

I must say I followed his example, for the food was exquisite. We ate fat chickens stuffed with rice, almonds and grapes, lambs wrapped in young leaves, which fell to pieces in the fingers, lamb cooked with spice, cucumbers and egg-plants, lamb filled with peppercorns and small luscious birds, in fact lamb as it may be in heaven but never is on earth !

The wife of the Sheikh was distinctly round, with large contented eyes. There were one or two younger wives, a sister and the female appurtenances of a brother, all of them pleasant women with some education and more knowledge than is usual of the rites and meaning of the Melewi sect.

The Sitt Umiya, her clothes representing a compromise between East and West, sat upon her feet on a couch which had undoubtedly come from Paris, and talked not about her sons, or my lack of children, but about the beauty which even women could find in the co-ordination of body and spirit. From her, I learned that the Melewi, who enter into a state of ecstasy while spinning like tops, differ from every other dervish sect, because they seek not to torture and humiliate the body, but to develop it "as a fruit burgeoning from the tree of the soul."

It is difficult to convey the contrast between the appearance of the Sitt Umiya and her words. There she sat, heaped upon the garish sofa, her feet, which were plump, crushed into leather shoes, a size too small. If it happened to be hot, she breathed deeply and sweat moistened the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Often she munched an almond cake and the crumbs fell unheeded on her bosom. But while her body reacted to the pleasures or discomforts of the moment, it did not in any way impinge on the occupations of her mind. There came a time when, in spite of the flies and the squawking of hens being done to death in a distant court, she actually made me feel the quality of that ecstatic vision wherein the Melewi knows that God is in himself. "Beyond faith and infidelity is he exalted," said the Sitt Umiya, her mouth sticky, her stomach swelling below the broad girdle. "He is not here at all, but in a place where all is one, where God is the very life in man."

I thought of the other dervish orders who achieve a state of ecstasy by burning themselves with fire, by slashing their foreheads with axes, skewering themselves to pillars with a spike thrust through the cheek, hanging by a blackening wrist or ankle, and innumerable other self-imposed tortures which scar and maim the body, or leave no mark according

to the purpose of the celebrant. In trances so induced, they seek the revelation represented by that mystical name of God, the hundredth, the Great Name which makes God the servant of the name. But the Melewi, serving flesh and spirit together, finds the secret name in himself.

"I will ask the Sheikh if you may come with us to the ceremony," said the Sitt, stretching herself modestly, her legs still doubled, a hand wiped on her skirt.

So, on a Friday night, we went by an upper passage to a balcony above the mosque. From behind a carved lattice screen, we looked down into a hall with a prayer niche in the southern wall. High above us, under the dome, rows of oil lamps hung from bars. In another balcony, men in brown robes and the dervish hats which look like broad-tipped sugar cones, played gently upon zithers, drums, an *audh*, and a flute made of reeds.

We crouched upon the floor and pressed against the lattice to see better. On my right, the Sitt Umiya, veiled and wearing a number of robes one on top of another, so that her figure acquired an exaggerated bulk, leaned silently against the wall. Her eyes dreamed. She didn't speak to me. On my left the younger women whispered. One wore a pair of new white gloves, of which she was very proud.

For those who have seen the Bektashi starving, the Rufai branding themselves with red-hot blades, the Ouani slicing their heads with maces, or the Sadi foaming over a meal of scorpions, the Whirling Dervishes may seem comparatively commonplace. But because it is devoid of horror and stripped, therefore, of all the emotions roused by pain, the ceremony has a special quality. It is, I think, more inhuman, or perhaps superhuman, than the orgies of the Howling or Fire-Eating dervishes.

In silence, twelve men entered the hall below us. They wore long black cloaks and conical hats. Bare-footed, with heads bent and arms crossed, so that their hands rested on their shoulders, they moved in single file towards a scarlet sheepskin laid in front of the prayer-niche. A thirteenth followed and seated himself in the middle of the floor.



## WOMEN CALLED WILD

The musicians began to play, slowly, with a lingering, dragging sweetness. I felt—oh, it is impossible to explain what I felt, for can excitement be combined with security and a deep content blend with a raging tide that is wine and warmth and light? From which it may be gathered that I felt a great deal, although for no particular reason.

The Sheikh entered and the dervishes remained motionless, while the Fatha—"God the Merciful and Compassionate"—followed a hymn. Then el Melewi stood upon the sheepskin and the brown figures with bowed heads processed slowly round him. The thirteenth, the Sema Zan,<sup>1</sup> divested them of their cloaks, after which, one by one, they poised before the Sheikh with the ball of the right foot crossed over the left, arms still folded and head bowed. El Melewi pressed his lips to each man's hat and as he did so the dervish began to turn.

The music changed and quickened. Flute and zithers maintained a sweeping melody, but the beat of the drums was a pulse. Regular and monotonous, it dominated the hall, and as each figure, with voluminous skirts swinging out from the waist, began the "zikr" or spin, he was caught up into the music and became part of it.

Beside me the Sitt Umiya shivered and drew a long breath. Then, it seemed to me, she ceased to breathe at all.

With heads drooped on their shoulders, eyes closed, arms extended, one straight out and the other bent at the elbow, the palm flattened backwards, the twelve dervishes turned on the axes of their left heels, quickening the motion with the balls of their right feet. Faster and faster they whirled, their bodies rigid, their heads hanging.

They were undoubtedly asleep within the spinning circle of their skirts, which ballooned upwards until I could see the baggy white drawers beneath them and the bare ankles. For fully ten minutes they spun as driven wheels, and then the Sema Zan stamped upon the floor. After a while, the sound penetrated the trance (hal) of the dancers. They spun slower and slower until, at last, they stopped and

<sup>1</sup> Master of the Ceremonies.

stood very still, with arms recrossed and chins on their breasts.

The drums beat a march and the dervishes circled round the Sheikh, but as each passed the sheepskin, he began to gyrate, and this time the spinning lasted twice as long. Like those spirals of sand which blow up suddenly in the desert, the men whirled, asleep so far as their material surroundings were concerned, awake perhaps in an ecstasy wherein, praising Allah, they found, like their founder, Jelal ed Din, that "Allah praised himself in them."

And all the time, the Sitt Umiya leaned against the wall. She made neither sound nor movement. Her veil had dropped. Her eyes were wide open, but when I shook her arm and dug my fingers into it, she took no notice. As the twelve dervishes left the hall, moving steadily, with no sign of giddiness, we lifted her and half carried her along the passage.

"She should have been a man and a dervish," said one of the younger wives, panting and picking up various objects which dropped from the person of her elder.

In the gilt and frilled room, we placed the Sitt upon a couch, not very gently for she was heavy. Her eyes still dreamed, but she asked for a pastry made of nuts and honey. While she ate, vaguely, dropping flakes upon the cloak she hadn't yet discarded, she remained in an attitude of the keenest attention. I wondered if she could still hear the music. "No, no," said the Sheikh's sister, "she is listening for the voice of the Archangel Israfil."

## COLOURED LIGHTS

### *The Waste Spaces between "Buenos Aires" and "Shanghai"*

My introduction to coloured lights was sufficiently startling. The more so because it happened in Algiers, which is Nice transported to the other side of the Mediterranean.

With some Americans, I went to see a negro dance. It was a good show. The men were Senegalese, newly arrived, and they'd brought with them a breath of the forest. They danced as if they enjoyed it, and the fingers with which they made the drums talk had not yet wearied. I remember we sat on cane chairs in a pleasantly sophisticated court with the usual tiles, blue and yellow, and an arrow-thin fountain in the centre. The blacks, comparatively naked, stalked and postured round the basin. They were great hulking creatures, with a grape-bloom on thighs and shoulders. When the rhythm broke, they laughed and parodied their own gestures. For them the dance was a joke. To make it real they needed the bush, with shadows leaping from a circle of flame.

I noticed that one man looked up to a lattice jutting over the court. I could see nothing behind the woodwork, but whenever the black turned towards it, he threw his head back and thrust out his chest. His smile was a blinding white streak. I thought of it as a blade drawn from the sheath.

When the dancers ceased to amuse themselves, they ignored us altogether. While they talked and capered, with their backs turned, an Arab whom I knew asked if I would like to see a very particular sight. I was sure it

would be a variation of the inevitable *danse du ventre*, but the Americans were eager, so we went upstairs to the room behind the lattice.

There, seated on hard mattresses and leaning against the wall, we watched young women, fully clothed, rotate their hips, as if they were corkscrews, and jerk their stomachs up to their breasts. One of them did a conjuring trick with her body. Lying on her back, she raised her head sufficiently for a tray, loaded with tea-pot, sugar-basin and so on, to be balanced upon her turban. In this position and without disturbing the objects on the tray, she went through all the motions of the *danse du ventre*. Her silk skirts lay tidily about her feet, but the buckle fastening her girdle leaped like a thing possessed. With a twist of abnormally developed stomach muscles, she sent it up to her chin. Her abdomen appeared to be a separate entity, with life and actions of its own. It gambolled with the buckle, tossing it here and there, as a ball, while the girl remained immobile. Not a cup rattled, not a tea-spoon slipped.

While her stomach sprang and spun, she turned slowly on to her side and called to a child seated on a ledge behind the lattice. The little thing approached reluctantly. I remember she looked backwards across her shoulder. The colour of a half-ripe chestnut and looking darker because of her lime-coloured silks, she hesitated in front of us. Twelve or fourteen, I supposed, and from the South, undoubtedly, for lips and nostrils held a memory of stronger blood. She was no Arab, nor yet, I thought, a woman of the town.

Encouraged by the girl with the tea-tray, she began to dance. Her body moved serpentwise under the green-and-yellow robe, and while she turned it, delicately, upon the axis of her hips, her arms were lost among the folds of silk.

Her garments became a tent blown about by the wind. Suddenly, before we knew what she was going to do, she rose out of them, a stem freed from its foliage. Warm brown, she stood in front of us, with the silks heaped about

her feet. No Arab certainly, for the shadows on her body were darker than thigh and arm-pit justified.

The Americans gasped. One of them settled his collar and tugged unnecessarily at his tie. I thought I heard another sound. The curtain across the door changed shape and swung as if a hand had been withdrawn.

So slight were the movements of the brown girl that I thought of her as a sketch, done with a hasty pencil, and wondered what the finished picture would be like. But the Americans had had enough. The girl with the tea-tray laughed and thrusting the child's clothes into her arms, hustled her out of the room. "Vurry interesting," said the salesman of zipp fasteners. "I'll say it is," he added, without conviction.

I said something quite different to the girl with the tea-tray.

"She is a virgin and not yet of an age to learn . . . " replied that sophisticated young person.

In good order, we retired. With his usual courtesy, the salesman opened doors and held aside curtains. In the court he breathed more freely. An apology hesitated on his lips, but he didn't know how to frame it. "Sure thing, I didn't know what we were going to see. . . ."

One of the dancing blacks crashed into us. He was running, the smile wiped from his face. This time, he didn't look up at the lattice. His great hands clenched and twisted as if he held something between them.

The Americans protested. Their conception of blacks was limited to Pullman porters and Harlem. The salesman opened the last door, but it stuck half-way. He pushed. The object blocking the passage beyond it crumpled against the wall. "Looks as if that darned negro had dropped. . . ." He never finished the sentence. For as we crowded into the passage, we found ourselves staring at the body of the girl who was not yet old enough to learn. She had, I think, been strangled.

In Oran I saw the other side of the picture. It happened

that I arrived after midnight and all the hotels were full. A mission, or a conference, occupied every available bed. I shall never forget that night, for I began it exhausted by an interminable journey and ended it in a fury. At the station, the porter told me it was no use trying hotels of the Ritz or Palace type. I must go lower in the scale. So I engaged a tattered cab, with a ghost of a horse between the shafts, and started in search of anything flat on which to lie. The driver took no interest in my plight. He wanted to get home.

Concierge after concierge turned us from respectable portals. Frowzy women leaned out of windows and shouted that even the kitchen was occupied. They made no mention of the bathroom on which my hopes were pinned.

After innumerable rebuffs, the driver pointed out that he had a bed, even if I hadn't, and he intended to make his way to it at once.

"I'm not going to leave this cab until I find somewhere to sleep," I retorted.

Upon which the man turned and I had a good view of his face. It was pock-marked, with one eye bleared like galantine. Altogether a nauseous countenance. I looked round and realised we were at the edge of the town, or beyond it. Heaps of garbage stretched into waste space. For weapon I had an umbrella, already broken on the quarters of a recalcitrant donkey. It seemed to me a moment for reason, but not for any promise that would suggest wealth. So I invented the closest possible friendship with the most puissant official I could imagine. I appealed to feelings which I knew quite well the driver, bastard of Europe and Africa, raking his livelihood out of a sewer port, could not possibly possess. My hat fell off. My nose, no doubt, shone, but a curious expression appeared in the one good eye above me. "You are right," he said. "I know a place."

Thankfully, I subsided against the suitcase. Whipping up the skeleton between the shafts, the man urged it with voice and reins to a pace of which I had not suspected it

capable. We rattled over stones and bounced vigorously round corners. When we met an obstacle, we took it in our stride.

"Let us arrive whole . . . ." I suggested, but the driver paid no attention. He'd realised where he could get rid of me and he was going to do it without delay.

In a street devoid of windows, where the doors hid in the angle of high walls, we stopped before a house as discreet as its fellows. If there were distinguishing lights, I did not notice them.

With a glance over his shoulder, the driver precipitated himself from the box and disappeared. After some moments, during which, I thought, a door opened and voices muttered behind it, he returned with a Levantine dressed as an Arab. "She is young . . . ." said the driver, which seemed to me an unnecessary introduction.

His companion peered at me before reducing me to the neighbourhood of tears with a hasty "You cannot sleep here."

"Haven't you a room?" I gulped.

"Yes," he said, doubtfully.

"Well then, I'm going to have it," I retorted, leaving from the cab and dragging my suitcase after me.

The Levantine protested.

"Nonsense," I said. "I don't care how bad it is. . . . hotel . . . ."

"It is not quite exactly an hotel," interposed the patron, but I pushed past him, and the driver clinched the matter by seizing the money I offered and retreating full tilt down the lane.

As the person with whom I was left seemed inclined to renew the argument on the doorstep, I pushed my hat still further awry in order to clutch my forehead, thus indicating, I hoped, the extremity of my fatigue, and said "Listen. If you will let me a room, any room, to-morrow I will go to the bank here and get money. I will pay you whatever you like." For I'd retained just enough sense not to say how much I had with me.

## COLOURED LIGHTS

So it happened that I spent a night in the street of blue lights. And it was an uncomfortable night, for, throughout the house, with the exception of myself, nobody wanted sleep.

There was no key in my door and all sorts and conditions of sounds came through the transom. The furniture might have been bought in Holborn. It was dark and highly varnished where it hadn't been burned with cigarette ends, or otherwise damaged, and it consisted chiefly of a bed sagging in the middle and a dressing-table with a broken mirror. The lamps intrigued me because they had red and blue bulbs.

Wedging the back of the chair under the door handle, I prepared to rest. I'd been eighteen hours in an omnibus train and three times as many in a car with nothing to recommend it except the endurance of the back axle. And after all, portions of the bed were flat!

I killed three bugs and spread my rug over the pillows, which smelled horribly of scent and stale flesh.

Within five minutes, the chair crashed to the ground. I sprang up, prepared for the worst, and found myself glaring at a negress who hadn't been able to restrain her curiosity.

Thrusting her out of the room, I arranged what I hoped would prove a more effective barrier. But while I dreamed of camels with humps which may have been the springs of the bed, a monumental beast fell upon me and I woke to find a woman seated on my feet.

"I want to see . . ." she began in good French.

Then my temper left me. Language garnered from I knew not where, but gorgeously apposite, I felt, flowed from my lips. Some of the expressions I didn't understand myself, but I'd heard them in market and café. Out they came—and out went the woman.

After that, I dare say the whole house came to look at me, but, with cotton wool stuffed into my ears and a handkerchief tied across my eyes, I slept.

I woke late, but everybody except the Levantine rose



later still. Leaving my suitcase with him, I went to the town on the pretence of getting money. In fact, I had a bath and drank a great deal of excellent coffee. When I returned, with the number of francs demanded clutched in a hot hand, a mute let me into the house. No sound came from behind closed doors. I went up to the room I'd occupied and found the woman who'd disturbed my dream of camels lying on the bed, smoking my cigarettes. "Enfin, you have returned, but what is this pretence about money?"

I gaped at her.

"You are rich, are you not, or you wouldn't travel by yourself? But what a folly anyway to waste your time like this."

Stung to retort, I asked, with what I hoped she would recognise as acidulated courtesy, whether she thought she was making the most of her own time.

"Evidently, yes," she replied. "This is a good house and my friends are rich."

In another moment, I found myself seated on a doubtful chair with an unwanted cigarette in my hand, listening to Jeanne-Marie from Toulon talking about her ambitions. They centred on Buenos Aires, or Shanghai. Oran she regarded as a stepping-stone to either.

"How did you get there?" I asked.

For an instant she regarded me with antagonism. Then she laughed. "How curious you are! Eh bien, one must eat, must one not? And if one is earning sixty francs a week and then finds oneself without work, one starves, n'est-ce pas, and that is the end unless someone helps."

"Someone helped you?"

"That sees itself. But he had a woman of his own, so he brought me here, where it is not too bad, for the Arabs are gentle with women and they do not ask too much."

"They ask a great deal of their own women," I retorted, remembering the negro in Algiers.

"But you do not think one sees Moslems in houses like this? There are only Jewesses and Christians. Above all, the men ask for a true Frenchwoman. . . . We have a reputation."

Jeanne-Marie turned upon the bed. Her dressing-gown fell open as her hip found a convenient hollow. In the harsh light of Africa, she looked about twenty-five. Her cheeks were round, her eyes unexpectedly ingenuous. She was pretty and the contrast between the dusky skin and the hair, its fairness artificially exaggerated, added to her attraction. "It is that I am thirsty," she drawled. "One is always thirsty in this climate." She rang a bell. Subsequently, she went out on to the landing and shouted. Eventually, a negress brought a bottle of quinquina, for which I paid the price of champagne.

"Tell me more," I said and Jeanne-Marie, who enjoyed talking about herself, asked "What d'you want to know?"

"If you like it? If they all like it?"

"I do not say it is gay, but it makes my affair all right and one saves. See then, after I have paid my friend, I can make six hundred francs a week and one does not say 'no' to that. If one likes it, you ask? Voyons, it may be that it is not your palate, but for those who have no taste for the workshop (*l'atelier*), or who have parents to help, or who wish to provide surroundings for their old age, it is a means like another. And do not believe what they tell you. If it is not a question of the heart, it is one of the stomach. For the most part, the girls are willing—it is reasonable that one prefers a bed to a slab of stone in the morgue. And it is well organised. If one does not arrange oneself with one, there is always another."

"Then there are no victims? It is just business?"

Jeanne-Marie sipped her quinquina and blew some cigarette ash from her chest. Minute freckles powdered her skin. The effect was rather amusing. She looked as if she'd just come from the beach. "I do not say that a girl knows always exactly what is going to happen to her, and there are those who have made fools of themselves and cannot go back, but, when there are thousands who wish to eat, why waste money on the few who prefer to starve?"

The hard-headed young woman with the eyes of a child used speech as an emetic. "Me, I am ambitious," she

said. "The woman of my friend worked in Buenos Aires, and figure to yourself if she raised her skirt thirty and forty times a day—and there were those who did twice as well—she could earn many thousand francs a week. One sees well that she is a serious woman. What diligence that! What an eye for affairs! Now she can live where she likes and in a manner of the most elegant." Jeanne-Marie sighed. "All the same one must be young for that repetition there." She tilted back her head. A frown crossed her forehead and she erased it with a careful finger. Obviously, she knew the value of her expression. Without the remnants of make-up on her cheeks, she would have inspired confidence as a nursery governess.

"Buenos Aires is rich," she said, "and the men are strong," for this conversation took place before the slump and before Albert Londres, estimating the number of minutes allowed to each client in the Casas Francesas, four to each block in Buenos Aires, scribbled the astounding result in his notebook—420 clients a week at five pesos each. It happened before I asked a Central European Minister in "B.A." if he had been able to repatriate any of his country-women. I remember he replied "I have letters from parents enquiring about their daughters who are supposedly in business here, but the girls themselves will not go back. They hide from me as if I were a leper and one could no more get them on to a homeward-bound liner than into the Consulate to sign a declaration."

Jeanne-Marie's further remarks were technical. They concerned the trade in which she intended to play a part. "When I've saved enough, I shall be a madame with a house of my own."

"In Buenos Aires?"

"Or Shanghai. It seems that the Chinese are generous and they excite themselves (*ils s'affolent*) over French-women. Evidently, with us it is more satisfactory. There is movement. . . . But it appears they like black hair. What an idea! Except that it is a good contrast on the pillow."

## COLOURED LIGHTS

I asked for my suitcase and the girl offered practical advice. Let me not pay till my cab arrived at the door. If one must be robbed, there was no need to add a tip. She got up and stood firmly planted, arms crossed, and feet a little apart. So one sees the market women arguing over the price of fowls or butter.

And yet another version of this ancient tale—— In Nankin, a merchant of mandarin rank, to whom I had letters of introduction, invited me to dine. The evening began with a deal of ceremony, in which, by that time, I was proficient, and it ended with a sensation. The merchant met me on the doorstep of his house and begged me to enter first. Having refused three times, we indulged in the peculiar ritual by which the guest, with many bows, attempts to place himself on the left of his host, while the latter does his best to prevent the change of positions. As the mandarin was twice my size and further enlarged by several robes lined with fur and covered with fine brocades, he had no difficulty in foiling my half-hearted scuttles.

"Walk slowly, I implore you," he said as we crossed the threshold.

"On the contrary, I shall walk very quickly," I replied, which, in any other country would have been unnecessarily discourteous, but which, in China, indicated that I had no right to the privileged gait of age and dignity.

After several such exchanges, we reached a room hung with strips of sea-green silk. My host asked me to point out the exact position on the floor where mats should be placed for me to sit. I replied, extravagantly praising his honourable floor and adding that I realised only too well my abject unworthiness to sit on it at all.

At this point, a serving-boy piled a number of mats beside an opium-stool. I made pretence of removing several while I repeated that one would be more than

sufficient for my indescribably insignificant self. My host replaced them.

We then seated ourselves, each being careful not to do so first, so that we achieved the most ludicrous half-way postures, until my joints gave out and I collapsed, with distressing lack of decorum, upon the mats.

Silence followed because the guest may not ask questions and the host, apparently, had no desire to do so.

The boy prepared two opium pipes and handed one to me. I thought I might as well try it, so I inhaled a long draught of the sickly sweet smoke and coughed. The merchant pretended not to notice.

Fortunately, before I achieved any of the sensations described by adepts capable of smoking their hundred pipes a day, several sons and nephews appeared, wearing European clothes. A few minutes later, I was dining with the whole family, at a table heaped with heads of flowers. The young men spoke English. Their embarrassed sisters and cousins understood nothing but Chinese.

I remember we began with green tea and soup. Thirty-two courses followed, without anything to drink. Serving-girls in trousers and long coats, deliciously embroidered, handed us napkins steeped in hot scent. With these we mopped our faces while sharks' fins, a jelly made of birds' nests, fungus, roast duck skin soaked in oil, eggs blackened and putrified after years of burial, succeeded each other in front of us. When I felt that never again would I need to eat, five delicate bowls, each containing a whole course, were offered to me, accompanied by a mass of sticky sweets and—thank heavens—tea.

Throughout the meal, a band of curiously mixed instruments had twanged and clattered in an adjoining room. Half a dozen girls, brilliantly painted, with jade in their ears and flowers set flat against their oiled hair, sang, or rather wailed, in high-pitched nasal tones. "How pretty they are," I said to one of the sisters, a fairy-tale creature whose brocaded coat fastened under her chin with pearls.

She smiled, an engaging, curved smile, which dislodged

a few grains of rice powder—and her reply amounted to this, “My mother took much trouble to choose them. She has always to select concubines for my father, as he is so very lazy.”

The wails became more piercing. Enervated by food and heat, I could no longer control my expression. “You do not like our music,” said one of the sons.

I made polite excuses.

The young men spoke rapidly, after which the thinnest left the room. “We shall take you to a restaurant where you will hear European music,” said the others.

So it happened that, towards midnight, I found myself in a room hung with garish brocade, listening to a woman playing Brahms as if it were a cherished torture and jazz with the air of offering us the worst insult she could imagine. While she played, she smiled, a fixed intolerant smile, as different as possible from the one with which the little Chinese had talked about her father’s concubines.

“She is a Russian,” explained one of the men. Their sisters had been left behind. Very stiffly, we sat in a row. I was in the middle, with a number of admirably suited and socked and cravatted young Chinese, all exactly alike, on either side.

The woman at the piano turned and looked through us. Her smile hit us in the eyes. I don’t think she could have been as old as Marie-Jeanne of Oran, but she looked as if she didn’t care what she did, or what anyone else did to her. Her dress was of rough wool with long sleeves. Her hair defied the pins. It flared from her head with the result that her face looked small and covert. “What is she doing here?” I asked.

“There are many such Russians in China. They escaped from the Bolshevics, but they have no money, and there is no work for them except this.”

Leaning against the piano, another girl, smooth, tired, indifferent, sang in a voice much larger than herself. She sang mightily, steeping herself in her song. The words rushed from her lips. They reminded me of a river

swollen by rains. And the girl at the piano continued to smile.

After a while one of the Chinese called to them and they came and talked to us. The girl with the voice had magnificent teeth. Her eyes were vast and sleepy. She held herself carelessly, leaning against the table, and her foot sought the highly polished shoes of the thinnest Chinese. The other, whom they called Natasha, stood in front of us, proud as hell, with her smile like a knife that cut her mouth. I couldn't bear it.

The oldest brother accompanied me to a rickshaw. "Yes, it is very sad," he said in an acquired voice. "She is a lady, of course, but she has no money." His face was completely blank.

It took me the best part of a week to find Natasha. Nobody chose to acknowledge they knew where the Russians lived. Finally, the porter at the restaurant decided to understand my questions. Accepting that which I offered, he gave my driver vague instructions. In accordance with them, we left the better portion of the town, and that is not too good, for the ancient capital has known, I suppose, more wars, rebellions, massacres and fires than any other city in the world. We passed the ruins left by the last revolt and turned into mean streets with a forest of signs hanging from the house-fronts. We asked information of empty-faced men whose eyes disappeared when they found it necessary to talk. We retraced our way. The driver suggested that it was no good place I sought and I'd better not find it. But we came at last to the end of an alley, with five-storey houses rearing on either side.

Down it I went, and hammered upon a dilapidated door. It opened on a string. I could see no one, but a staircase leaned against the farthest wall. "At the top—when you can go no farther," the porter had said and I wondered how he knew so much. But I climbed the stairs, heaped together as carelessly as a pile of boxes in an outhouse.

The place was a warren, the various habitations distinguishable by their smells. On the last landing, the roof drooped familiarly towards the walls and a door hung crooked. I knocked and, after some delay, the girl with magnificent teeth opened a slit through which she stared at me. Her mouth was smeared with sugar. She said, "We have no time to waste," but she let me in.

Natasha rose from a divan where she'd been lying full length, her hands behind her head. She showed neither surprise nor pleasure. I noticed that her dress covered her from throat to wrist. Without being particularly voluminous, it hid all that it is possible to hide. The other girl wore a chemise and a kimono with a torn hem. She had evidently been sitting on the floor, eating pastry covered with green icing. Hitching her garment over her breasts, she stood on one foot, looking at me, her brows lowered, while, with both hands, she scratched first her armpits, then the back of her neck. Natasha asked me to sit down. She boiled water in a saucepan on a stove and made tea which she poured into glasses. We talked about China, while I glanced furtively round the garret. It reminded me of a card house on the point of collapsing. The walls leaned inwards. Holes gaped in the roof. Basins, into which the rain dripped, stood about the floor. There was very little furniture. When Natasha said to her friend, "I've told you it is time to dress. You will be late as usual," the girl pulled open the door of a cupboard and the whole thing fell forward. Unperturbed, she held it up with her hands above her head, until, between the three of us, we managed to push it back into place. "It always does that," she said, and took out some undergarments, finely embroidered. Into these she changed, slowly, pausing now and then to dig her nails into her flesh.

And all the while, Natasha contrived to produce and maintain the atmosphere of a tea-party in a capital city. It was impossible to talk to her about anything personal. With the perfection of her smile, she defended herself against any approach to intimacy. We conversed



and the Tai Ping dynasty. The other girl, about ~~port~~ <sup>rose</sup> Vera, turned her smooth body to the light to pull out hairs with a pair of tweezers. Natasha ~~did~~ <sup>did</sup> not to notice. She offered me a cigarette. Her ~~is~~ <sup>hands</sup> were long, with small, smooth knuckles. The carriage of her head suggested the centuries of authority which had gone to her making. Vera asked questions. Natasha told me about the beasts which guard the Ming tombs. As the light failed, her smile became exquisitely uncivil. It mocked me for being unable to go and for being obliged to go without having said anything that mattered. Yet when she shook hands with me, her pride momentarily satisfied, she expressed pleasure in my visit. Vera came out with me, on to the landing. Leaning over the rail, she said, "Some of the stairs are . . . rotten," and she used a word so foul it had the effect of cold water.

"Is there anything I can do?" I retorted in a matter-of-fact voice, for I felt capable of dealing with Vera. The girl shrugged her shoulders, as she stared into the foetid depths below her. "If you are passing that cake-shop in the square, you might spring some chocolate. . . ."

"Of course, but I didn't mean that. Can't I do anything more effective?"

Vera raised herself and looked at me, indifferent or contemptuous, I didn't know which. "You must know you can't . . . really. . . ."

"But the Chinese?"

"They're all right. They're gentle and thankful for anything they get. It's the Europeans who make scenes, and they give one the illness. . . . Altogether, they're hell." She spoke without emotion.

"But Natasha?" I protested.

"Oh, she suffers too much. I think she will die."

Here again is the tale but without tragedy. Some years ago I shared a second-class sleeper on the Orient Express with a French girl bound for Beyrout. She had nothing to read

except a few papers like the *Vie Parisienne*, so she insisted on talking from Paris to Constantinople. Fortunately, she had an amusing little voice, and as it did not vary much in tone, I could ignore it except as an accompaniment to thoughts aroused by my books. At a certain moment, however, I became more interested in my companion than in a history of the Ottoman Turks. It was at a frontier, one of the many frontiers that happen in the middle of the night. An official had glanced at my passport and returned it—with distaste. The English are not popular except in circumstances de luxe. The French girl offered her papers and the man, conscious of her as she lay in the upper berth, asked “What are you? What are you going to do?”

“A teacher,” replied the girl.

The official returned her passport with a laugh, “What strange lessons you could no doubt give, Mademoiselle!”

“He must be drunk,” I said, poking my head out of the lower berth.

“No, no, he has seen others,” replied the girl, leaning down. Her hair fell deliciously round her face. Her lips were fresh and her shoulders appetising.

“But what about the school in Beyrout?”

“Ah cela! Did you believe it? One sees well that you are English.”

“You showed me your papers!”

“Voyons, to-night it happens that I am indiscreet, so I will tell you a secret. They are the documents of my sister who, most truly, is a teacher. She wears spectacles, that one.”

“How old are you?” I asked on impulse.

The girl above me sighed. A ripple crossed her admirable shoulders. “Alas, I am no longer a first mouthful,” she said. “I have twenty years and three months, but that is not yet age.”

“Good Lord!” I said and the honey-coloured creature laughed. I wondered how many liqueurs she’d drunk,

seated opposite the young commercial traveller in the dining-car.

"Have you never been in love, Madame?"

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Eh bien, if one loves a man, one works for him. Is that not so?"

Conscious of smuts and dishevelment, I was at a disadvantage, and with the train shunting, it was difficult to crane upwards in the position of a periscope. So I muttered, "What a work!" while I recaptured a fallen pillow.

The girl's voice became a trifle shrill. It must have been three liqueurs, at least, I thought. I'd been asleep when she came to bed. Exactly what lessons had the commercial traveller learned?

"Il s'affole de moi! He is mad about me. See how he spoils me." She showed her nightgown which was covered with lace, and a watch on her pleasantly shaped wrist.

"But if you work, have you no money of your own?"

"What an idea! When one gives one's heart to a man, there one gives also one's purse."

"Don't you keep anything at all?" I asked, rearing uncomfortably from my berth.

"To what good? Each Saturday he comes to the house where I make my affair and we amuse ourselves well and I give him my sous. But I have only to ask for a dress, or some linen and I get it. Cela se voit."

The conversation seemed to me fantastic. I felt reality slipping like the rug across my feet. "Don't you get anything else?" I asked.

"I permit my heart a holiday. It is so good to be able to cherish the man one loves. How he is chic, that one! Never a crease in his trousers and a different handkerchief every day."

With a final effort at equilibrium, I asked, "You are returning from a holiday now?"

"Ah that, no! In my affair one does not allow oneself a holiday until one feels old age, when one approaches the

thirties, you understand. No, I go to Paris to seek a friend who is not at all in her right place. It arranges itself that she shall join me in Beyrout. My man has the greatest confidence in my judgment. He said to me 'You have the eye, all right. Bien sure, me also, I shall like her.' "

" You don't mean . . . " I stammered.

Creamy skin and corn-gold hair blurred above me. " Surely I do. All the same, it is understood I shall be the 'wife.' She will always be 'the other one.' But she is a good worker and affairs march well in Beyrout."

In the morning, while we breakfasted on coffee and stale rolls, the pseudo teacher babbled gently of prices in the Paris shops, of the naked hills through which we passed—she thought them disagreeable since they bore no signs of domesticity—and of her stomach which needed occasionally " a little glass " !

And a last rendering of the tale, familiar to Lilith and Hagar and Jeanne-Marie of Oran, to the tragic Natasha and the comic twenty-year-old bound for Beyrout. But this time it is only a fragment, inexplicable, without beginning or end. Late at night, or perhaps, since we were all young, early in the morning, four of us were returning from a dance. As we turned out of Queen Street, I noticed a man and a woman disputing on the edge of the pavement. He held her arm and she struggled with him. When our chauffeur braked at the corner by the Curzon Hotel, the woman slipped from the man's grasp, flung herself on to the step of the car and wrenched open the door. Precipitating herself across our legs, she cried " Help me ! For God's sake, help me ! "

Her feet hung out, so it was impossible to shut the door, but I got hold of her and tried to lift her on to the back seat.

The girl beside me shrank into the corner, with a horrified, " She's drunk ! "

"No, I'm not," said the woman, with surprising clearness, "but if you let him get me, he'll kill me."

One of the men with us said "Come, come——" or something equally narcotic. He made a half-hearted attempt to thrust the woman through the still open door, but I clung to her shoulder and protested, "I won't let her go."

"Get on!" I told the chauffeur. But by this time the man who'd been on the pavement was trying to drag his companion out of the car. "She's my wife," he said.

"I'm not!" cried the victim, and then, hastily, "Let me go home alone. Just that, I ask you! Let me go alone."

The car gathered speed. As nothing would induce me to let go the woman who sprawled across my knees, my companions made short shift of the man. As we swung up Half Moon Street, he sprawled upon his back in the road. His hat fell off. His overcoat opened to show a white waistcoat and a heavy silk scarf.

"Where d'you want to go?" I asked.

"The last house on the left."

"Will you be all right there?"

"Yes, yes! If only I can get in before he catches me." She was a brown mouse of a woman, not very smart, with a slash of scarlet for a mouth.

"Hurry, hurry!" I begged the chauffeur, for I could feel the agony of the creature who crouched, with fingers ready on the door handle.

The street sped under us. We drew up with a crash. The woman threw herself out. She had a key in her hand. Fifty yards away, we heard the man running. His footsteps clamoured on the pavement. I held my breath. What on earth was she doing? Why couldn't she get the door open? But she did, just in time. It closed as the man reached the step.

The chauffeur waited for no orders. As he swung into Piccadilly, we saw the man flattened against the door, as if he tried to speak through it.

## COLOURED LIGHTS

"We're well out of that," said one of my companions.

"What can it mean?" murmured the girl in the corner.

"I don't know," I replied. And I still don't know.

## WITCHCRAFT, POISON OR OPIUM?

### *Java*

It was raining, but then it generally rains in Java. The land was sleek as if it had been freshly washed and ironed. In the Kedoe Valley the sugar cane looked like stretched silk, of a shade between yellow and green. The mountains were painted a little indefinitely—just splashes of lilac and blue upon a colourless sky.

In the distance, the Borobadoer might have been a deliciously ornate piece of pastry-work. Its seven terraces delicately grey, were heaped one upon another after the fashion of wedding-cakes, and the carving frothed into all manner of fanciful shapes, so that one could imagine a cook in apron and high hat, his tongue between his teeth, earnestly squeezing out sugar from a tube. Beside me, on the front seat of the Ford, a Dutchman explained the origin of the temple. "A king built it as repentance, for he marry his daughter . . ." In the middle of the road a goat suckled her kids. To avoid it, I veered towards a child hidden under a cartwheel hat. With a squawk, the boy plunged into a bush and the hen he had been carrying made straight for the wheels.

The Dutchman loosed his grip on the side of the car, tilted a stream of water out of the brim of his hat and remarked, "That is eleven and a half in two hours and one of them a chicken . . ."

I glanced at him reproachfully and he hastened to add, "An inconsiderable number for so large a lady."

The road became more congested. Water-buffaloes

wallowed wherever the mud was thickest. Figures, naked but for a loin-cloth and polished by the rain, walked under the roofs, rafts and tea-trays of their hats. Carts, like hencoops on wheels, rattled along behind pairs of gaily caparisoned ponies. Closed wagons with carved roofs suggested arks weathering the flood.

As we approached Djokjakarta, huts built of laths and reeds appeared among the incense trees. In the doorways crouched slim, brown figures, who stared at us with indifference. Sometimes they chewed a paste made of betel-nut, and their boneless fingers moved among small pots and boxes containing the ingredients. I'd never seen faces more completely closed. The Dutchman, who was large, practical, and accustomed to the island, said, "A European can live with those woman for years and at the end he will not know whether she love or hate him."

In front of us appeared the mass of the Sultan's palace. Interminably, the walls reared one within the other, so that the effect was of a leviathan coiled upon itself. "Now you will see . . ." said the Dutchman and found it impossible to continue.

Within a few minutes, I understood his hesitation, for I can hardly believe that palace exists and belongs to a small, creased, world-weary man whose knowledge and ignorance are equally beyond comprehension.

In the first court, so far as I remember, there were slaves, with sugar-loaf hats balanced upon a succession of pigtailed. I have a vague recollection of tall, scarlet spears and a wall splashed with red where traitors were summarily executed. There was another court with a guard of nobles asleep on corpulent yellow bolsters. I remember a clump of bamboos in the corner, looking like damp ostrich feathers, and under them a particularly puissant personage with his turban awry and his naked stomach protruding above a jewelled belt. The handle of his kriss seemed to be embedded in rolls of flesh. His coat was open and his sarong trailed from under it. Sounds indicative of repletion issued from his middle and he seemed oblivious of the fact



that whenever a branch stirred a shower descended upon his finery.

At some point we came upon a garden where the unbelievable scarlet of Flamboyants seemed to have run into pools on the surface of which the fallen petals looked like paint. Beyond were the harem precincts, and on the threshold we were confronted by a curious platoon. It consisted of very old women. They were naked and withered to the waist, where their swords were belted, but they held themselves and moved like soldiers. Grey-fleshed, with lime on their hair, their skin furrowed till it hung, paper thin, between the bones, they might have been ghosts but for the stiff brilliance of the satins which encased their hips and thighs. The officer held a drawn kriss, the blade resting against the bone of her shoulder. Her body was a series of hummocks, and two teeth protruding from the gum had grooved the lower lip so that they looked like tusks.

The Dutchman spoke—in Javanese, I suppose. The woman replied, briefly, as if the matter could have no possible interest for her. The conversation continued while the guard subsided upon their heels and spat betel-nut juice. At one moment, I remember, they rose and saluted. The Sultan's clothes were being taken to the bath. In a scarlet lacquer chest, they were carried on the shoulders of crones who looked as if they might crumble under the weight of an extra button. Golden umbrellas sheltered the procession, and under the last of them walked a boy, with the skin of the tropics, pale and brown at the same time, and in his arms the favourite—a fighting-cock.

It was much later that we found ourselves in an apartment of which I have very little recollection except that it framed a woman to whom no ordinary description of age could be applied. Beside her, the harem guard were adolescents on the brink of life.

"Well, you wanted a sorceress and there you see the largest of all." The Dutchman's adjective accentuated the fragility of the figure seated on a mat, a betel-nut set

within reach. It was as much denuded of sex as of any other attribute and I was surprised when a voice crackled across the lips. It seemed to me as dry as the rustle of leaves on gravel, and the woman differed so much from the rest of humanity that I could, at last, believe the tales told of her.

"There is no poison she not know," explained the Dutchman, "and in Java there are too many poisons. A rope lying on the road may be cobra. Pollen brushed off plant in the forest may mean death, not so at once, but in year or two year, a thousand mile away."

He went on talking. His voice was ponderous and unaccented, so that he made facts out of what should have been fables. He recounted the Club gossip. An Italian had been moved to Aden by the shipping company for which he worked and, after months of inexplicable pain, he'd gone blind without there being anything the matter with his eyes. A burgher of Amsterdam, singularly unimaginative, had lost his reason on the boat which took him from Batavia. The tales always ended in the same way. One man had died from a rash diagnosed as harmless. Another had watched paralysis creeping from ankle to knee, knee to waist, before he'd shot himself. A third had succumbed in a fit, during which he tried to tear himself to pieces.

"But why?" I asked, unbelieving. "Why?"

"Mixed up with native woman. . . ." retorted the Dutchman. "Try to leave her, but she won't let go."

I don't remember that the "sorceress" contributed much to the conversation, although the Dutchman addressed her at intervals with a respect which would have satisfied an Empress of China. But at one moment she turned her head to give an order. I can see now the barren effect of the skull, hairless and corrugated.

Subsequently, a woman, curved like a bow, so that she appeared hollow from breast to knee, brought fruit in a painted bowl. On the top of the splendid, tasteless forms, with which the forests abound, were furry red lichees. Eating them with avidity, I remembered the first sentence

I'd learned in Malayan, "Give me some more." But when I stretched out my hand, the sorceress took a needle, apparently from the skin hanging about her waist, and drove it into two of the lichees. Then she gestured to me to take one.

I hesitated, and the woman who had brought the fruit anticipated my action. I thought her beautiful, although her nose scarcely broke the flatness of the profile which slipped from under the arched forehead. Her skin was greenish-gold in the light and dusky at the roots of the hair. Her lips and nostrils had the bloom of ripe berries.

Tearing off the rind, her fingers plastic, her wrists fluid as water, she thrust the lichee into her mouth. For a moment she crouched immobile and expectant. Then her face changed.

The Dutchman announced in a voice that would have exploded a miracle, "In such trance she can see the future." He shrugged enormous shoulders. Sweat ran down his face and lodged in the creases on either side of his nose. Red mud smeared his forehead below the line made by his hat. Nobody could have been more ordinary.

The sorceress glanced at him, or rather the pebbles that were within her lids turned in his direction. Then she took the second lichee and gave it to a crane which had been standing on one leg, its head hunched between its shoulders, looking at the rain. Within a minute, the bird was a heap of untidy feathers, to all appearances dead.

The Javanese watched my dismay. All at once, there seemed to be a great number of them in the room, but there wasn't an expression anywhere. I tried to imagine a smile on the mask which the sorceress turned to me, but I don't know whether the effect of her experiment left her amused, or contemptuous.

Words shivered across her lips. The Dutchman rose. I noticed how his coat clung to his shoulders. Darker patches showed under the armpits.

As we left, the woman who'd eaten the lichee stirred into

soft, small movements, like a child between dreaming and waking.

In the first court I asked for, and, at the same time, attempted, explanation. "It can't have been poison. But why did the bird die?"

The Dutchman demurred. "Nothing is unknown to those woman . . ." he said, and then, "If you look far enough, the future always death . . ." He remembered the verb which he found elusive. "*Is death*," he corrected himself. Mopping his forehead and loosening yet another inch of belt, he concluded, "She was a large sorceress, not so?"

We drove a long way, between shining rice-fields, before we reached the plantation where I had been invited to stay. It rained all the time, but so gently that one took it for granted. In fact, I cannot imagine Java in the wet season without that bloom of rain which renders indefinite the horizon and accentuates the values of the different greens. Within twenty miles we'd passed coffee, tea, sugar, rubber and coco-nuts. The land was thickly cultivated and the muddy rivers occupied by herds of water-buffalo, of which only the noses could be seen.

In a village, on the edge of the plantation, the Dutchman asked to be set down before a house rather larger than the matchbox huts of the natives. The roof was elongated by drooping eaves. Trumpet-vines and orchids screened the verandah, from which sounded the brittle clink of anklets as a woman slipped through the mosquito netting. I saw only the flash of a sarong, raw purple and red, before the curtain fell.

With more care than I'd hitherto expended, I drove the Ford through the village street. It was axle deep in mud. Swarms of Malaysians—imported labour—Sudanese from the north of the Island, Javanese from the south, competed in the colours of their sarongs and the unwieldy magnitude of their headgear. Skittish goats eluded the pursuit of a child clothed in a pagoda hat and a smile. Under the mango trees the light filtered as if through fathoms of sea water.

In the diffused green, flying foxes hung head downwards, thick as gooseberries.

A turn of the road showed the land as a chessboard, each square of rice surrounded by dykes, and on a hillside, an old-fashioned Dutch house, headquarters of the plantations. From the verandah a man shouted instructions for negotiating the last ruts. A few minutes later, I was seated in a grandfatherly cane chair, drinking the best coffee in the world and trying to emulate the attitude of my host, whose outstretched feet were on a level with his shoulders. "So you went round by Djokjakarta, to see some of old Kloeck's family, I suppose," commented the Englishman.

"His family?"

"Didn't he tell you? You saw the sorceress-in-chief? A bit of a handicap, what? But she's his grandmother-in-law, or it may be further back than that, and damn' useful, too. The relationship gives him a hold on the natives."

Remembering the crumpled figure composed of leather and lime, I couldn't believe it sufficiently human to have borne children, but my host gave me no opportunity for comment. "This is a social occasion for us. We don't often get a sight of fresh faces. . . ."

"Large ones," I interpolated, remembering Kloeck's description.

My host smiled. It was a pleasant smile which made him look younger than he'd any right to be. In comparison to the people with whom I'd passed the day, he appeared exaggeratedly clean. His square, good-tempered face was smooth. In the general atmosphere of dampness it shone, but his clothes were uncreased and his eyes unexpectedly blue. Definite and uncompromising, they blazed between the lids. But at the corners there were fan-shaped wrinkles in which the sweat pearled. "Well, I've done my best for you. I've collected the only neighbours—except old Kloeck, who goes native after sunset—a couple of Frenchmen from the company plantations. If you want local colour, you can get it from them."

"How? Why?" The day had been full of questions.

My host, whose name I've forgotten, so he might as well be called Smith since he remains in my mind as essentially English by habit as well as appearance, took some trouble to explain. "They're in with the natives and though they're about to be reprieved from all this . . ." he glanced at the tumult of creepers clambering up the pillars and at the rain which fell, smooth as a cloth beyond them, "I doubt if they're altogether happy about it."

However, it seemed to me the Frenchmen were much like the rest of their compatriots exiled in a land where there was neither "movement" nor "life." They played a forward game of bridge and were impervious to a succession of "paheits," a drink guaranteed to remove any lingering sense of discretion to which the newcomer may be attached. After my second, I recounted what I imagined were my impressions of the sorceress and was gratified by my lucidity and range of expression. After my third, I believed everything I was told.

Still later, I found myself sitting on a cane sofa with the younger Frenchman and listening with unnatural interest while he talked about women. It is, of course, impossible to reconstruct a Latin's conception of his *affaires du cœur—et du corps*—in any language less equatorial than his own. Suffice to say that from the violent and exotic phrases, I acquired the impression that the women of Java provide sensations compared to which the efforts of the rest of their sex are as stage thunder to a cyclone.

"The trouble was . . ." Here the boy hesitated, but I realised his love and fear of the island as a force greater than his powers of resistance.

"You're going away? How soon?" I asked.

"In three weeks," he replied, without conviction.

Of that evening I remember little else, except the personality of the older Frenchman, whose name was Raoul. He'd been a rolling stone, and instead of moss had gathered, among other things, a scar where a Somali leopard had cleft his face from temple to jaw. He'd spent three years in

Djibouti on business of his own. Pearls, hashish or gun-running? He didn't explain. Lean and muscled with whipcord, obviously contemptuous of his fellow countryman, I imagine he was just about as hard as they're made, east—very considerably east—of Suez.

"I shouldn't be surprised if Raoul went home alone," said my host, escorting me to the door of a vast, white-washed room in the middle of which loomed the bed, a mosquito-netted expanse innocent of coverings, with a Dutchwife<sup>1</sup> flung across the centre.

A day or two later, riding, as is the custom of inexperienced Anglo-Saxons all over the earth, during the hours which everyone else devotes to "siesta," I lost my way among mangoes, bamboos and trees which burst into flower as soon as they cleared the stranglehold of parasites. My rat-like pony took charge. A native house appeared where I least expected to see one. From behind the reed screens came the sound of an instrument which I recognised later as the "bonang," a wooden bar, hung with a double row of bells, or gongs, made of laiton. But at the time I was only conscious of the rhythm. The musician indicated the theme on a "rebab," a two-stringed violin, which cried plaintively under the bow, but the gongs swelled and repeated the melody until it was irresistible.

Stringing together the few words of Malayan I'd been able to learn, I approached the house. As I expected, a half-naked figure pushed aside the screen. It was a girl, slight and supple, so delicately curved that she resembled a plant rather than a human being, something brilliant and heavily scented growing in the forest. Her fingers fluttered like the buds of the trumpet-vine in a wind. Her face was petal smooth and utterly secret. Only her mouth, a stain on the living gold of her skin, expressed something from which I was separated by the 3,000 miles between Java and England.

I faltered my question, but at the first words a commotion arose in the room beyond the screen. A voice spoke to me

<sup>1</sup> A bolster.

in French and the next moment the boy who'd talked about women appeared on the threshold. He had a sarong round his waist, and above it his ribs gaped like the spars of a derelict. He carried an opium pipe, as if he'd picked up the first thing to hand, but he didn't look like a smoker. His eyes were clear, too clear. With painful precision they took in more than was within my vision. Summoning a smile, he explained to me exactly how I must return to the road, and then it occurred to him to offer me coffee. Curiosity forced me to accept.

In a second room, darkened and smelling strongly of incense, we sat on a divan, and in spite of all my efforts, talk was spasmodic and uninteresting as a list of words in a dictionary. Eventually the girl brought coffee essence and water. She was preceded by the tinkle of her anklets and followed by the soft susurus of bare feet on the reeds. In our company, she was a shadow. When she left, her presence dominated the room.

Of course, I reproached myself for letting my imagination run away with me, but from the adjoining apartment came the sound of the two instruments, and their appeal grew so strong that even I, who had no interest in the woman, found it difficult to sit still. Beside me, the boy, whose skin had acquired a peculiar greyish tinge, fidgeted and sweated. I could see his ribs hammering against his chest, and his eyes burnt in their sockets. He looked as if he hadn't slept for weeks and as if, when he did sleep, he wouldn't wake. A thread of sound added itself to the music. To me, it was like a ghostly cat intent on pillage, but it evidently had a different effect on the boy. He moved so quickly that he upset the flask of essence. Calling something in Javanese or Malayan, he subsided on a pile of the native cushions which always seem to be stuffed with potatoes. His breathing came in gasps and his expression suggested unbearable strain. When I spoke to him, he didn't answer, but the girl had come in and was crouching at his feet. Motionless and doubled into the smallest possible space, she remained, and from her lips issued a suggestion of sound



J—tenuous, yet infinitely sharp. It did not change a semi-tone, and my ears rang with it the whole way back to the British plantations.

That night I asked my host, who looked more Smith than usual, what was the matter with the younger Frenchman. "Nothing, nothing at all," he said.

"But he looks as if he'd die at any moment."

"He probably will."

"Then, what d'you mean? How can you say there's nothing the matter with him?"

"There isn't. At least, you can take your choice. The doctor from Pegadon Baru says opium, because it sounds better than poison, or witchcraft, but the boy doesn't smoke. A pipe a week to be able to talk about it, that's all."

"Poison or witchcraft. . . ." I repeated, with as much disbelief as I could summon.

We were sitting on the verandah. Moonlight robbed the creepers of their reds and orange. The soft persistence of the rain was a net through which the stars could be seen. A lizard scuttered across the ceiling. Small, secret noises came from the woodwork.

"Oh, you must've heard . . ." said my host and he sounded tired. "Surely, it's impossible to be in Java, even for a few months, without hearing the usual stories—worn out, of course, and full of holes—of the things these women do. It's not much of a show living alone out here. Most of the foreigners get hold of some girl to housekeep for them. I don't say they aren't good value, but give me a dog! It's safer. In time, of course, the man's moved on, for the big companies have interests all over Malaya. And if the girl's vindictive, that's the end of him. No, don't ask me what she does. I can't tell you. Nor can anybody else. It may be poison. It may be some sort of hypnotism. It may be that damned music of theirs! You've heard it? Didn't it make you sick?" He laughed to cover his embarrassment and poured out a moderate whisky. "It's all rot, of course, but it's true."

For some days I didn't see the French boy. Then, by way of local colour, my host insisted that we go down to Pegadon Baru, where the Malayan coolies were celebrating harvest.

Packed on a trolley, we lurched and rattled through the night. The rain was a damp quilt. From it the down seemed to be escaping. Streams ran down our necks. Drops tickled our faces. At the end of our journey we were met by coolies with flaring torches, who carried us across the mud, shoulder high, in chairs mounted on poles. Occasionally they slipped, calf deep in slime, and we were only saved from the morass by a headman who precipitated himself from one chair to another, giving help wherever it was most needed. At last, we were deposited in a brilliantly lit hall, blazing with red and gold. Fantastic carving decorated the walls. The lanterns were enormous balloons hanging from the mouths of painted dragons.

Half a dozen Europeans sat in the principal seats. Among them were the two Frenchmen, Raoul resplendent in white linen, the boy crumpled and apparently oblivious of his surroundings. To begin with, I hadn't time to do more than glance at him, for a singing girl slipped to my feet and in embarrassing contiguity to my brogues, which were caked with mud, extemporised a song about my extreme grandeur, translated by Kloeck as, "She say you largest—so large—lady she ever seen." Bowls brimming with strange foods were offered to us. We ate to the accompaniment of zithers and gongs. Girls with lacquered hair moulding the shape of their heads danced without moving their bodies. Only their hands, alive to the tip of each henna-ed finger, wove patterns suggestive of the hieratic poses carved on the stones of Angkor. Jewels twinkled on their feet. Silk sarongs made cocoons of their limbs. Their eyes were dead.

"It's a case of racial nostalgia," said the Englishman. "They haven't a single expression to fit the conditions of to-day. They're bedded in the past. They won't let go a solitary custom and, my God, they're tenacious!"

He glanced at the younger Frenchman and looked away, his face registering discomfort. At my elbow, the doctor, a lean, dry man, overworked and sparing of speech, said, "I give him a week now."

As if he'd heard, the boy dragged himself upright, but the effort brought the blood to his cheeks. The thin suit hung upon the pegs of his bones. His skin was transparent. As he shuffled to a seat beyond the immediate radius of the lamps, Smith said to the doctor, "Can't he come to terms with that darned female of his? Is she murdering him for fun?"

The lean man shrugged his shoulders. "He could accept a life sentence out here, like old Kloeck."

"If he was one of my lads, I'd damn' well deal with the woman."

"How?" asked the doctor.

There was silence.

Raoul came back with us on the trolley. Nobody welcomed his presence, because of the illogical feeling that he ought to show more concern over the fate of his countryman. But, when Smith pressed him on the subject, all he would say was, "I wanted to hustle the boy on to a boat weeks ago, without saying anything about it, but he is in love, or he is afraid . . . two things a man must fight for himself." And then, for no reason at all, I had the most extraordinary impression that Raoul knew more than he would acknowledge. It was the sort of conviction with which you wake from a dream, certain something important has happened, but without the least idea what it is.

The men talked about agriculture. The rain continued. Dawn broke just as we reached the end of the line.

Stretching our cramped limbs, we started to straggle up to the house, between plantations that gradually acquired form. The ruts were full of petals. A leafless branch lay across the track. In the half light, it looked as innocuous as the rest of the jetsam with which a storm always strews the earth. I was quite near it when my host seized me by the shoulder and dragged me back. For days afterwards

I could feel the grip of his fingers. The next minute Raoul had pushed past us and simultaneously the branch began to take an interest in its surroundings. With a single movement that had in it all the appearance of leisure, but was lightning quick, it reared and shot towards us, but Raoul was quicker. I am told it is a feat to kill a full-sized cobra with a stick. If so, the Frenchman was an adept. In the half light, and with a single stroke, he smashed the reptile's head. It dropped, still writhing, within a few inches of his feet.

"By God! That was great!" exclaimed Smith, who found the deity useful to emphasise his emotions. His admiration found further words when the Latin had refused coffee and gone off, through the rice, towards his own house. Then I learned some facts and a good deal of legend concerning Raoul. There was nothing he hadn't done and he didn't know the meaning of fear.

"Does *he* live alone?" I asked.

"Not much!" retorted Smith.

"Well, then, is *he* going to sail next month?"

"Sure thing."

"Why?"

"You don't suppose it'd be any good monkeying with a man like that, do you?"

I said I'd given up supposing anything at all that had any relation to common sense, and I went into my room and banged the mosquito-netted door. Later I lay awake on the top of the vast expanse of bed, with an arm and a leg thrown over the Dutch-wife, and said to myself, "Doctors make just as many mistakes as other people. Obviously, the boy can't be dying of nothing." About Raoul, for my peace of mind, I refused to think.

Next day I went away. In Sumatra I saw tobacco and tapioca and the teak forests, inhabited by a species of small tiger and crowds of monkeys. I fished in Toba lake with an Achenese who described how his people used to relieve the tedium of life by harrying the peaceful Dutch settlers. I slept in Battok houses where the eaves

are decorated with oxen heads, and a skull or two of another kind hangs above the hearth. And after some time I returned to Java, nominally to see the volcano near Tosari, which erupts with praiseworthy precision every twenty minutes. But I told myself that it would not be out of the way to pass by the plantations where I had been so generously entertained.

So once again I drove a Ford through squelching ruts and pools of slime. In the middle of the village street the same skittish goat butted its kids. The same child, half smothered by its hat, made ineffective gestures with a scrap of sugar cane. And from the verandah of his house, only distinguishable by its size from the native dwellings which impinged upon his compound, old Kloeck shouted the news. There'd been three days without a drop of rain. A director was staying at the company house. The Tuan<sup>1</sup> of some other plantation had a new wife. The French boy had died.

Kloeck's voice ran on, while the goat prepared for an offensive upon the radiator.

I interrupted him. "What's happened to Raoul?"

"He's still here—business, I suppose."

We looked at each other and the Dutchman's eyes shifted. With care, he picked an exceptionally flamboyant bloom. "It is better to live here than be dead anywhere else," he remarked as he stuck it in his buttonhole.

Eluding the goat, I pursued a red track between rice fields, making a long detour because, so I assured myself, it was the better road. Consequently, I met Raoul on his way back from the plantations. He looked hard and tough and much less hot than anyone else in the same circumstances, but I refused his offer of a "paheit."

"Why are you still here?" I asked, wondering how I could describe his mouth.

Raoul looked at me squarely. I don't suppose in all his life, he'd thought it necessary to evade the eyes of friend or enemy. His own were cool and a trifle mocking.

<sup>1</sup> Master.

### WITCHCRAFT, POISON OR OPIUM ?

“ Why haven’t you sailed ? ” I insisted, confused by an assurance I could never hope to imitate.

“ Would you like to know the truth ? ” he asked in a matter-of-fact voice, so that I felt we ought to have been discussing the effect of the rainfall on a new crop, or the peculations of a store-clerk. “ Eh bien, I was afraid to sail and I am still afraid.”

## WOMEN INTO BEASTS

### *Central America and Africa*

SOMEBODY once wrote a book called *Lady into Fox*. It was a delicious affair, especially when the transformed wife worried her dressing-jacket and the husband felt it wouldn't be safe to trust her near chicken.

"If only it could happen to so-and-so," said innumerable readers, thinking of the people they would rather do without. But I'm not sure that it doesn't happen.

In Central America, for instance—Yucatan, Guatemala and so on—there is a secret society of Naguales who believe they can change themselves into the forms of their guardian beasts. Adepts are to be found living normally in the villages, differentiated in no way from their neighbours. But every Christian ceremony which they attend, duly dressed in their best clothes, is cancelled as soon as possible by a ritual performed in the hut of the nearest Nagualist priest. I've heard such wizards, or witches, for women dominate the cult, claim all the powers of the Indian fakirs, including the ability to cut off a limb and replace it without damage to the victim.

In the bush, a peon once threw himself at my arm, as I was going to shoot a jaguar, with a cry, "It is my cousin, the son of my uncle!" He nearly caused an accident, so we asked him to explain.

"It would have been murder," he retorted and would say nothing more.

But one of the other labourers assured us that the "cousin Miguel" made a habit of wandering about in

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the body of a cougar. He had been robbed by an enemy, and the police would give him no satisfaction, so what could he do but lie in wait as a wild beast? Sooner or later he would come upon the thief alone. Then he would tear out the dishonest man's throat and what court could send him to prison?

We agreed that the method had its advantages and we asked, with becoming gravity, was it not possible to acquire a guardian, into whose skin one could change at will.

The peon became a trifle vague. It was better done at birth, he said. Any provident mother took her child to a Nagual priest and provided it with a familiar in the shape of a reptile, bird or animal, before it left her breast. The advantage, of course, was a double one, for the infant acquired a protector and the grown man a refuge, or a weapon.

In Brazil I met a cattleman who insisted that he belonged to the family of the serpents. He had considerably more power over them than the ancient snake-charmer who delights tourists at Luxor. For the most deadly came when he called and remained to play with him or, as he said, "to have conversation." I've seen him seated on a stump, in a newly cleared paddock, with a snake a few inches from his boot, its head reared, its tongue flickering, just as if it were hurrying out the news it wanted to tell to a friend.

On another occasion, when I wanted to kill a "coral,"<sup>1</sup> the old man protested as if it had been a brother. "It has done you no harm and it is unlucky to kill that which has not hurt you."

The reptile slid over his foot. "Look how it thanks me for saving its life." The old man was thick-set and gnarled as a tree, but, for that moment, as he bent towards the creature, he acquired something of its suppleness.

With twinkling eyes, he looked up. "On a feast-day," he said, "when I am tired of the aches in a man's body, I join my friends who are also my servants."

<sup>1</sup> A deadly coral snake.



"What do you mean?"

He chuckled, and his grimace expressed a certain amount of malice. "What would you? I become a snake."

Such a statement is common as near home as the Hebrides, where an old woman is often suspected of turning into a hare, but it is generally dismissed as superstition.

I don't know if this sweeping word suffices to cover the activities of the troglodyte women on the "gebel" between Garian and Gadhames in Tripolitania. They live underground and they never see the sun if they can avoid it. Their houses are a warren of caverns centring on a pit, forty feet deep, where they keep their fowls and animals.

When I last visited these queer people, the moon happened to be full. Unusual activity pervaded the burrows. I remember the girl who led me from the bleak tableland<sup>1</sup> into what seemed to be the heart of the earth, said to me, as I stumbled in the darkness, "Hurry, hurry, for I have much to do."

"What is happening?" I asked, clinging to her hand and feeling the smooth mud walls, which opened into doorways or across passages.

"To-night we travel!" replied the girl and I thought her feet danced.

In one of the larger rooms, with a faint blur of daylight on the threshold, a number of women gathered round a fire. A great deal of cooking seemed to be in progress. I asked for the lady of the house, whom I'd met on my first visit to Garian, and she came to me with a twitter of recognition, for these people retain something of the bird speech noted in Libya by Herodotus.

She was slight because of her small bones, and her colourless skin belonged to the darkness in which she lived. Her eyes, with the pupils contracted to pin-points, were so deeply shadowed that the flesh looked bruised from cheek-bone to brow. "Your coming is blessed," she said, but I thought she seemed disturbed.

Generally the troglodytes welcome any visitor who

<sup>1</sup> She waited for me at the entrance to the tunnel.



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relieves the monotony of their lives, for the women never leave the labyrinth surrounding the court which, for them, is the outer world, except when they marry into another family, or when they go, feet first, to burial. But that night, even the girls, with gold coins in their hair and fox skins round their shoulders, cast anxious glances into the corners.

Beyond the range of the fire, blanketed in smoke, I could see nothing but the earthen walls, decorated with a design of running beasts and painted with yolk of egg. But soon, the general excitement communicated itself to me. Crouched upon a mat, as near as possible to the rather fœtid air which crept in from the court, I found myself peering into the shadows, imagining movement and waiting for something to happen.

I noticed that the grandam, whom, at my first visit, I had called Lilith, because she might well have mothered the earth, retired at intervals to another cave. I thought a flicker of light came from it and I wondered why, because the troglodytes can see in the dark. It is only in daylight they are blind.

The women wore their best silks and all the jewellery they possessed. Their eyes seemed to me unnaturally bright. They whispered together and when they were not talking, their lips, violet not red, parted as if their breath came quickly.

Curtained by the smoke, I asked the girl who'd brought me there, "What is it all about?"

She looked at me, with laughter softening the shadows of her face. "When the moon is at its height, we go out to see the world," she replied.

"I didn't know you ever went out."

"We don't, but foxes do."

I suppose I stared at her and she evidently enjoyed my surprise. "Do not be afraid," she mocked. "You will be asleep when I run out on four feet instead of two." She moved her hands as if they were paws. "And when you wake, I shall be back here as a woman, but so tired."

By way of entering into the spirit of the game, I asked her what she expected to see. She replied, "Trees and the mountain and the far plains." And she began to describe places of which she could only have heard. Yet, as she spoke, I had an uncomfortable feeling that she had actually seen them. The details were too exact for hearsay and the point of view too personal.

"Who told you all that?" I asked, and she replied, "I went there as a fox," and she bit her lip as if she'd said too much.

I supposed then that, at full moon, the troglodyte women were able to induce a state of trance in which they imagined themselves foxes. But I was disturbed because the girl had shown such intimate knowledge of scenes and people she could never have seen with her eyes.

I had to keep my mind fixed on David Garnett's Vixen sitting up against her frilled pillows, snarling at the breakfast-tray, in order to rid myself of the feeling that anything might happen. After all, apart from their queer night beauty, the troglodytes looked like corpses. Their houses were conveniently furnished graves. As the smoke, which was strongly aromatic and of a peculiar colour, began to affect my head, I thought, perhaps they're all dead and it's just their ghosts that become foxes. This seemed to me an eminently comforting solution. But I had enough sense left to determine that I would not go to sleep.

After registering that resolution, I remember only three things. We ate kid, cooked in strong spices. Consequently I was very thirsty, but there seemed to be nothing to drink. A little later, sniffing violently, I withdrew from the neighbourhood of the fire. Leaning against a perfectly good bolster, but wide awake, I found I could see into the inner cave. A thin, bright flame burned in a tin set on the floor. Beyond it, I had a glimpse of a European bedstead and a chair. The rest of the space was occupied by foxes. I don't know how many there were, but there they sat, upright and wary, or curled with their heads upon their paws. They didn't move and one of them stared,

unwinking, at the flame. After my first amazement, I thought, "Well, it's some kind of fox festival—you're very lucky to see it." And I remembered the fox temples in Japan and the fox-people of Inari with whom the ordinary, hard-working villagers will not marry.

The third thing that happened was a bowl of dark liquid which I imagined to be coffee. I drank it with the gratitude of a Bedouin whose empty waterskin has been replenished in mid-desert, appreciated the flavour which bore no resemblance to coffee and knew nothing else at all. I say "knew nothing" because I have the vaguest possible recollection of foxes streaming past me, one of them lame. And I thought I made a great effort to say, "There's one for each of them." But when I regained my senses, I was lying on a bed that smelt of butter or wax, in pitch darkness. Below me, there were lazy movements.

For a moment, I was terrified at the thought of being shut in with a pack of foxes, but relieved when I found I couldn't smell them. As my eyes became accustomed to the situation, I thought I could make out a faint reflection of light as a square on the wall. The floor swelled into hummocks. When I'd convinced myself they weren't foxes, I got off the bed, which was high and hard, and made my way cautiously between them. When I blundered against them they were soft and I thought they breathed. I spoke to the nearest and received no answer. Then I shouted. The ensuing silence was anything but reassuring.

Fortunately, the square of thinner darkness resolved itself into an opening. Passing through another cave, I found a passage leading to the court. In it, animals that made no pretence of being anything but domestic and utilitarian, pursued their usual vocations. Two kids butted each other for the udder of a nanny goat. A hen showed every sign of having laid an egg. I drew long breaths and wondered how I could have slept so long, for the sun was in mid-heaven.

It had sunk beyond the rim of the pit and the sky flamed before the first woman appeared on her threshold. She

yawned and stretched. Her face was hollowed as if by exhaustion. I hardly recognised the girl who'd laughed at me the previous evening. I rushed at her, exasperated as much by what I considered unnecessary hunger, as by my inability to find a tunnel leading to the plateau. Half a dozen times I'd been near losing myself in the maze of caverns. "I couldn't wake any of you. You might've been dead!" I exclaimed.

The girl blinked and looked down. "The light is too strong," she said, "come in."

She moved as if her feet hurt her.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We went so far . . ." she muttered.

I caught her by the shoulder and shook her. "What d'you mean? And what was that drug you gave me?"

"You slept as I told you," she said, "but we did not sleep till the hour of the second prayer. Ai-ee, I am still weary."

She brought me bread and, in a stupefied fashion, blundered about the hearth, upsetting a pot in the ashes, before she succeeded in making fire.

While we drank very bad coffee, which I took the precaution of tasting with the tip of my tongue, I questioned her about the foxes, but she would say nothing. There were some skins on the wall opposite the door, I noticed, but none on the floor.

One by one, the women came in, dragging their feet and moving as if stiffened by an unusual amount of exercise. One of them limped and I remembered my dream of the lame fox. All at once, I could stand it no longer. I had to get back to the world as I knew it.

The lady of the house took me up the tunnel. We heard a camel grunting in his underground stall. A small animal pressed past our feet. I hurried on, dragging the woman with me, and when I reached the air and saw the plateau, boundless in the dusk, I felt as if I'd come out of a tomb.

"With safety," said the woman and left me. I didn't

hear her move, but I saw the flutter of her skirts, purple and indigo, as she disappeared into the burrow.

A day or two later, I discussed the whole matter with an Italian who'd given his name to the "gebel."<sup>1</sup> He had lived and fought equally hard, but a rifle for mistress and locusts as a daily diet had not robbed him of imagination. He knew the great cliff which for so long represented the frontier of Italy, and he knew also the limits of his knowledge. So he said, "It is, to our way of thinking, impossible, but, since the days of the Romans and before them, these people have had an affinity with the foxes. The men, as you know, are good cultivators. They work among the grain and the olives. They have no clocks and how can they see the sun in those holes of theirs, yet they rise with the dawn and, *dio mio*, it is a strange sight to see them come, all at once, soundless, out of the earth. They go back at night and, without sign of habitation, you can smell dinners to make your mouth water. It is all very simple except that every month, when the moon is full, the women are supposed to be able to change themselves into foxes."

"It's impossible," I said.

"Of course," agreed the Italian, "but it is an old legend, believed by the country-people. No one of them would kill a fox till the moon waned."

I made sounds indicative of astonishment.

The Italian took no notice of them. He said, "On the moon's day, as they call it, every man brings one, two, three foxes to his house underground, as many foxes as there are women in his family. That surprises you, does it? You ask yourself, how could he trap them, how could he be sure of trapping just the right number? I have asked that too and I have done more, I have hidden myself to watch the men coming home. . . ." He paused.

"Well, what did you see?"

"Very surely, they did not carry the foxes they'd caught."

<sup>1</sup> Mountain.



We were sitting in a small café on the outskirts of Tripoli, a city not unlike one of the better ports of the Adriatic. The waiter was a Levantine. The nickelled pots and glass-holders came from Rome. Posters advertised an American film. It was all very commonplace, which made it harder to believe what the Italian finally vouchsafed. "It was dusk," he said, "and one couldn't see clearly, but, as I live, those animals came of their own will. I saw them, I tell you, trotting, one after another, or bunched together as dogs."

"Are you sure they weren't dogs?" I asked, but I remembered I hadn't seen a hound of any kind in the Troglodyte city.

The Italian didn't trouble to answer. He said, "A legend. Clearly! But there are strange things in the 'gebel.'"

While he dripped absinthe on to a lump of sugar, watching it with the delight of a mountaineer new to the pleasures of a town, I asked, "Would you shoot a fox at full moon?"

"I live in the 'gebel,'" he said, without meeting my eyes and then, shrugging a vast expanse of shoulder, "Certainly *no*. I am not an assassin."

A large number of native peoples believe that each man or woman has a familiar beast in which his own soul is hidden. When the animal is killed, the human being dies. Others imagine they possess a secondary or external soul which lives in a wild beast. Thus, according to Frazer,<sup>1</sup> the Yakuts of Siberia hold that every shaman, or wizard, keeps his spirit, or one of his spirits, in an animal living far away in the mountains. In Nigeria, crocodiles seem to be the favourite receptacles for what Miss Kingsley calls "bush souls." Hippopotami are favoured among the Galla in Southern Abyssinia because they can assist the warrior by overturning his enemies' canoe. Some of the Australian aborigines believe every bat is the life of a man and every nightjar that of a woman. In fact, from the

<sup>1</sup> *The Golden Bough*.

## WOMEN INTO BEASTS

Arctic to the Southern Seas, there is scarcely a tribe, black, brown or yellow, which does not believe in some link between the individual, a family, or a race and its totem animal.

In Africa I've met elephant-people, in Melanesia serpent-men and owl-women, in Malaya fish-women and in Sumatra, among the Bataks, families whose existence depends on monkeys, cats, dogs, tigers, buffaloes and even locusts. But only once have I seen the logical—or illogical—result of such a credence. It happened in the Arussi<sup>1</sup> mountains, where hyenas are a pest. Every night we used to hobble the mules within reach of our tents. And quite regularly, towards midnight, we used to be wakened by a hideous commotion. At first, we thought we were about to be slaughtered, for screams and shots alternated with the crash of animals breaking into the bush. Then we became accustomed to the habits of our mixed following. The muleteers cared about nothing but their beasts. When the stampede began, they used to rush out with terms of endearment and opprobrium and try to catch hold of any portion of any mule. The soldiers, who added to our dignity and our difficulties, treated the whole journey as a joke, and the chance of potting a hyena as the cream of the fun. They hurled themselves pell-mell out of the tent where they must have been heaped like whitebait, and fired at the first thing they saw. Such indiscriminate enthusiasm had the most unexpected results. A nagadi<sup>2</sup> was hit in the shoulder and a cock blown to pieces. The hyenas laughed as they withdrew. When the commotion abated, the guide, with his turban perfectly rolled, for he was a Moslem, used to emerge from his blankets and ask who the Christians had been fighting. Last of all, the cook, his chamma<sup>3</sup> tucked up to his nose, would ask why we'd been so careless with whatever animal had died, for it was assuredly too much damaged to eat. The only perfectly happy person in the caravan, a slave who wore the big

<sup>1</sup> In Southern Abyssinia.

<sup>2</sup> Muleteer.

<sup>3</sup> Shawl worn by Christian Abyssinians.

saucepan as a hat and beat tunes on it when his spirits overflowed, generally failed to wake at all, and was cursed by exasperated muleteers who stubbed their toes falling over him.

As we were marching hard and eating, none too well, when a village could be induced to dispose of its surplus eggs or millet, a succession of such nights proved too much for our tempers. We argued that there must be some way of dealing with hyenas and blamed each other because we didn't know it. Of course, we tried fires, but, unfortunately, Abyssinia is as full of spirits as Arabia or Malay. I don't think the ghostly serpent with a jewel in its forehead has crossed the Red Sea, or the bodiless head of Penanggal with her intestines dripping from her throat been transported from the Straits of Malacca, but Arussi is haunted by every other ghoul which native imagination can conceive. Even the monkeys are suspect, for who knows what spirits hide in their delightful black-and-grey bodies? The result of so much superstition is that no Coptic Abyssinian will sit up alone in the dark. And if there is any sound which he doesn't understand, a blazing fire and the company of a dozen intimates won't stop him bolting for the nearest refuge. So the hyenas continued to hope for a meal of mule and we waged our nightly battle at the expense of our vocal apparatus until, one day, we came to a village where Gabra Gorgis,<sup>1</sup> or Gabra Selessi,<sup>2</sup> or Gabra something else, informed me there lived a remarkable sorceress. Most fortunately for us, her familiar was a hyena. He looked at me expectantly and, whichever Gabra it happened to be, I'm sure his hair curled closer than the blackest and best astrakhan, his face shone like newly dried coffee berries and the pulp of his lips parted over stained teeth. "Yes," I said and waited for more. "Her soul is in the hyena," explained the black man, "and those who are not so religious say it is more holy than the picture of Maryam in the church of the Trinity." The "Slave of St. George" insisted that a person who had so much influence

<sup>1</sup> Slave of St. George.

<sup>2</sup> Slave of the Trinity.

with hyenas could, doubtless, be of the greatest assistance, but the rest of the party showed no inclination to camp near the village. They said they were not in the least scared. With the mules hock deep in a stream, they said there was no water. With unblinking eyes, they stared at the hyenas and deplored the lack of grass. It was the Moslem who said contemptuously, "They are frightened of witchcraft and of their own shadows."

I thought it would be interesting to see the sorceress, so I went on camping, in spite of the protests of the nagadis and soldiers. "It is an evil place," they said. "We shall sleep and when we wake, who knows if we shall be

didn't think of any suitable retort, so I chose a site, a forest on one side and a slope of grass on the other. I thought we'd be far enough from the village to avoid the companions and there was a lovely view, with the sun gilding the foreground. Sullenly, the soldiers unrolled in tent-pegs and arranged the sacks and our baggage. The soldiers gathered in a group. They were used to bandits, but it was new to fight spirits.

The sorceress remained unmoved, for he possessed a number of amulets in which he had unlimited faith. He came to my tent with the suggestion that we go at once to the village, for the sorceress would be trotting round as a hyena later on, he presented a peculiar sight. He'd put on a clean chamma and hung every talisman he possessed on top of it. Others depended from his ears and forehead. He held a stone in his mouth and when he spoke, he thrust it up into his cheek, so that he looked as if he had toothache.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A bezoar from the inside of a monkey," he replied.

I'm not sure that I know exactly what a bezoar is, but it plays a large part in Eastern magic. I imagine it as a sort of gallstone and I believe the most effective come from the white ape and the porcupine. Gabra Gorgis said his was

still growing, and he fed it on millet meal and the sweat of his body.

As we walked down to the village, he regretted my riding-boots and the mud on my breeches. He thought I ought to have contrived a more appropriate costume and hoped the sorceress would not be offended.

"Do you really believe in her?" I asked.

"She can cure and she can kill," said Gabra Gorgis.

With that I had to be content.

The village consisted of the usual round mud huts, thatched with cane. Some of them were surrounded by yards with broken walls. Pigs, goats and chickens occupied the middle of the lane, which was deep in slime and littered with stones. The sorceress' hut looked as if it were about to fall down. Its roof sagged over the door. I thought of untidily cropped hair hiding a forehead, for two small boarded apertures had the effect of eyes and the door gaped as the mouth of a primitive deity. But all this was imagination, of course, for the hut was just ordinarily dilapidated like hundreds of others, and the woman who occupied it resembled every ancient Abyssinian who's shaved her head in widowhood, or had it forcibly cropped as a punishment for lying. She wore a very dirty chamma, which I supposed had been soaked in tallow, for it was the colour of wet sand. Her feet were bare, and since she had walked on them in all weathers and circumstances, they were crumpled as an elephant's ear. I could not have distinguished her face among the crowd of battered, mud-brown creatures, with sacks for breasts and claws instead of hands, whom one sees every day in the market—except that she was thinner. I began to readjust my impressions, for the woman's body was little more than a stave. "She looks as if she never ate at all," I whispered to Gabra Gorgis.

"She will not touch food while she is a woman," he returned.

"Why not?" The man's explanation was not very clear. "When she is thin, she can easily get into the body

of her familiar, but . . .” he blew himself out, “when the flesh is fat, it is more difficult.” I’d heard, in Sumatra, that the expert who can distinguish the particular beast which is his totem (for the ordinary person only knows that he belongs to the clan of the bear or the serpent) fasts and otherwise mortifies the flesh before attempting to make use of the animal’s body. Legend has it that the moment of change is painful, especially if the dominating party is in a condition where the material prevails over the spiritual.

“Are you sure she does change?” I asked Gabra Gorgis, while the woman sought a jar of tedj and from it filled a drinking-vessel.

“At night, this house is empty, but a hyena with a deformed foot wanders round the yard.”

The sorceress came out of the shadows with the horn of an ox in her hand. The ale brimmed over and she steadied it with what I thought to be a doubled fist. But as she handed me the ceremonial utensil, I saw spikes sticking through the back of the palm. That hand had been voluntarily closed and it had been held so, heaven alone knew for how many years, until the nails had grown through the flesh.

It was the first time I’d seen such a sign of ascetism in a woman. In India, of course, any tourist can watch fakirs lying upon beds of spikes and in the best German circus he can see a man who calls himself a dervish, walking on blades sharp enough to cut paper. If he looks closer at the fanatics in Benares, or other holy cities, he may observe one of them with hooks stuck through his back, by which he has been dragging a ceremonial chariot, or a wizened little creature sitting beside a shrine, with a bent limb stiffened by twenty or thirty years in the same position.

But I had not expected to find such self-torture practised by an ignorant old woman, whose Christianity was diluted with other faiths. I thought that for anyone who had enough strength of will to produce that unnatural fist, the subjugation of a hyena would be child’s play. For I supposed this to be the explanation. The lonely old creature

had made a pet of an animal usually regarded as wild and the village had told tales.

Gabra Gorgis sat upon the floor, fingering his amulets. He took care never to meet the sorceress' eyes, but he treated her with the greatest respect. When he spoke of our disturbed nights, it was by way of conversation. He asked nothing, nor did he imply that our hostess had it in her power to grant a favour. I had established myself on the edge of a wooden frame, which must have served as a bed, because the hut was indescribably dirty. Civet cats, whose fur provides oil, scuttled under my legs and I hoped they would keep their fleas to themselves. The woman sat on her haunches, rolling a plug of leaves in her mouth, while she listened to Gabra Gorgis. Her replies were in keeping with the tradition of her country, the only one where women talk less than men. For in Abyssinia female testimony cannot be questioned. It must be accepted in a court of law without supporting evidence.

I looked round the hut and saw nothing that could be connected with magic. A few clay jars, a horn or two and some gourds hung upon the walls. Manure was piled in a corner. When it dried, it would be used for firing. There was a scrap of fly-blown mirror and a chest with the hinges broken.

When we left, the woman bent with that sudden doubling of the waist peculiar to Ethiopians, and kissed the air in the neighbourhood of my boots. I replied with every courtesy which Gabra Gorgis could translate. As we walked up the hill, I asked, "Well, what d'you think we've achieved?"

"You will sleep well to-night," said my henchman, removing the amulets which, stuffed into his ears, had considerably impeded his hearing.

An hour or two later, while I sat outside my tent eating the mess of chocolate and white of egg which the cook made when he wished to propitiate me, a shape blundered out of the dusk. For a moment, I thought it was a dog. Then, as it crossed the radius of the hurricane lantern set

upon a packing-case, I saw its body, sloping backwards from the shoulders and the heavy head held low. As usual, it moved as if it were blind and one of its paws seemed to be malformed. But all I thought of was the mules. I'd got hold of my revolver and was going to try a long shot when one of the Gabras shrieked at me and upset everything within reach, including the lamp. I echoed his yells, thinking he was going to have one of those fits, to which noise seems to be the best antidote, but he clutched my arm and dragged the revolver from me. Then he fell at my feet, sobbing, and made as if to burrow into the earth. "What on earth is the matter?" I demanded, for he seemed to be in the last stages of terror. By this time, of course, muleteers and soldiers had gathered and there was a babel of explanation. It all concerned the sorceress, and then I remembered the tame hyena. "All right, all right," I said. "There's no harm done." I returned my Browning to its holster and searched in the grass for the remains of my dinner.

That night we slept as if neither mules nor hyenas existed. No sound disturbed us. We'd meant to start early, but when I woke, the position of the sun remarked on my sloth, and a peculiar stillness pervaded the camp. I shouted for water and none came. I peered between the flaps and saw some crumpled figures lying where they'd quite obviously fallen. Beside them, were the indications of a meal and, more ominous, several empty jars. Hurrying into my clothes, I went out and stamped about, shook the recumbent muleteers, shouted at them and did other futile things, but it was no good.

The villagers, impressed by the audience which the sorceress had accorded us, had come up the hill late at night bringing eggs, fowls, bread tasting of charcoal, and a vast amount of tedj. This nauseous concoction is supposed to have been the mead of medieval monasteries. It is much stronger than ale and over-indulgence had had a disastrous effect upon my followers. They were still dead drunk and the only thing to do was to let them sleep. I



had to cook my own breakfast and feed the unfortunate mules, so I cheered myself with the thought of what heads the "Slaves of Saints" would have when they woke. And I decided it was one degree better than a glut of raw meat which incapacitated the muleteers for forty-eight hours owing to the violence of the purges they insisted on taking.

By midday a few disconsolates were sitting up and wishing for death. In the afternoon the muleteers started a half-hearted quarrel over their beasts. The Moslem guide took his rifle, made motions as if to see if it were loaded and fell on top of it. Nothing happened, so we left him to snore.

Dusk came, and with it an unnecessarily large meal, indicating that the cook felt ashamed. While I ate, I watched the men wandering about as if neither their feet nor their heads belonged to them. Gabra Gorgis, bending to my ear, announced that it had been a good drink and tomorrow they would walk like lions. I couldn't see the Moslem, for he wore a khaki suit instead of the white chammas of the Copts.

With a vague feeling of repetition, I saw the hyena appear and lope across the edge of the lamplight. It must be looking for food, I thought. Swinging about, with the clumsiness habitual to its breed, it passed within a few yards of the place where the Moslem lay. Presumably he woke and found it almost on top of him. So he fired and unfortunately the rifle was loaded. I heard the shot as I scraped out the last spoonful of jam and, in the unexpected silence which followed, I heard a scream. Thank God, such sounds are not common. I couldn't describe it, nor do I want to think of it. I know nothing about hyenas, except so far as their mule-baiting is concerned. Perhaps they do shriek with the voices of women on the rack, but I doubt it.

The animal had been hit in the shoulder. It struggled away, down the slope, towards the village, and a mound of men fell upon the Moslem before he could fire a second

shot. The rest of the camp went into a trance. They were too frightened even to scream.

When the heavens didn't fall, nor the earth open and swallow us, they recovered sufficiently to crowd into the tents and sit there with lamps lit and rosaries between their fingers, while they waited for a worse horror than they could imagine.

Three times, we heard the raucous laugh of hyenas, but I had to go out alone. One of the mules lamed himself. Others broke their heel-ropes, or tore up the pegs to which they were fastened.

Before morning, I'd expended a good deal of ammunition, but the memory of that scream made me fire into the air. When the others ventured from their tents, I was cross and exhausted. The only thing I wanted was to leave that village, but I wouldn't go without seeing the sorceress. When I announced my intention, the muleteers crossed themselves and hurried on the loading. The soldiers inconsequently left. When we caught them up, five miles away, they said there were bandits on the road and they'd gone ahead to clear it.

Meanwhile, I'd never seen the tents so quickly struck, nor the luggage adjusted to the right beasts with so little argument. Without waiting for food or drink, the caravan hastened to put as much space as possible between itself and the village of evil repute.

Only Gabra Gorgis remained with me.

"Why haven't you gone?" I asked.

"I couldn't leave your mule," he said, with his eyes on the ground. His berry-brown skin had paled to something between pewter and dried earth. His knees shook as we went down the slope, but he clung to the mule's bridle and murmured phrases which had nothing to do with Christianity.

The village appeared to be deserted. The mud was as deep as ever, but no pigs wallowed in it. Doors were shut. I don't know if their superstitious owners crouched behind them, surrounded by animals and fowls, finding a

measure of reassurance within their own walls, appealing to Maryam the Virgin Mother and to the black Christ, while they fingered pagan amulets and waited for a witch to die. Perhaps, they stared at us through apertures we couldn't see. If so, they must have expected the worst, for we made straight for the yard of the sorceress' house. Gabra Gorgis could not force himself beyond the outer wall, so I left him there, leaning against it, with his chamma over his face and beads clicking through his fingers.

Inside the hut, a figure lay upon the wooden couch. The civets scuttled and squealed underneath it. A hen perched on the frame. For a moment I hesitated because I thought the woman slept. Then I saw the blood on her chamma.

I did what I could, but something had passed through the body, between breast and shoulder. I thought it might have penetrated a lung, for blood oozed from the sorceress' lips and when she breathed, there was a horrible sound in her throat.

I remembered the way Abyssinians nicked their bullets round the nozzle to make them expand, while I tore up my shirt to make a bandage, but it was useless.

I stayed in the hut till a woman, roused by Gabra Gorgis who thought I'd been clawed to death by a dying hyena, crept in to take my place. Then I told her what to do.

Before I left, I looked for any weapon which could have inflicted such a wound. I looked also for an animal shot through the shoulder. But there was nothing at all—just a woman dying from loss of blood—and no sign of how she came to be doing so.

No sooner had I mounted than Gabra Gorgis beat the mule into a canter. He ran beside it, hanging on to my stirrup. The exercise restored his speech, if not his colour. He assured me that, henceforth, every hyena would be an enemy. We must camp where they couldn't get at us and build a thorn fence for safety.

"They can't possibly make a worse nuisance of themselves than they've done already," I said.

## WOMEN INTO BEASTS

The Slave of St. George cried to me in words that his priest would certainly have disapproved.

Nothing further happened to us. At night the usual hyenas made the usual amount of noise and no more. When I told the story to the casual, they laughed and asked pertinent questions concerning the effect of tedj. When I repeated it to the learned, they cited so many more conclusive examples of lycanthropy that my head swam and I visualised two million surplus women turning into beasts.



